



# Study Finds Keys to Hispanic Student Success

By Carole Shelley Yates

**I**n the spring of 2007, AASCU used its study team process to discover why 11 member institutions are successful at the retention and graduation of Hispanic students. Sponsored by AASCU, the Education Trust and the Lumina Foundation, the broad findings of this study reveal many of the same strategies and approaches shown in AASCU's 2005 Graduation Rate Outcomes Project. George Mehaffy, AASCU vice president for academic leadership and change, explains that AASCU is interested in Hispanic student success because "that population of students has been the least well-served by K-16 schools in general, and higher education in particular."

*Hispanic Student Success in State Colleges and Universities: Creating Supportive Spaces on our Campuses* was published in late 2007 and provides campus leaders with the findings and recommendations of the study team members. Regarding the study results, John Hammang, AASCU director of special projects, remarks, "Campuses with a culture of supporting student success in general, and paying specific attention to the Hispanic community, are doing very well. Our study teams also emphasized the ordinary approaches being using to help all students succeed."

Like the Graduation Rate Outcomes Project, the teams for this study found no overriding factor that was responsible for students' success. For example, team leader and Kent State University Stark dean Betsy Boze

says, "Supporting student success is so ingrained in the culture and fabric of Texas State University San Marcos (TSUSM) that the faculty and staff were surprised we were visiting them; they didn't think that they were doing anything special or different."

TSUSM was one of five campuses chosen for having traditionally high graduation rates with little or no difference between majority (usually white) and Hispanic students. Hammang notes that in addition, six campuses were visited because they showed marked improvement in the Hispanic student graduation rate since 2004, the first year graduation rate data was reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS).

**T**he study teams found that because networking and family are highly important in Hispanic communities, institutions need to provide an on-campus equivalent. This led to intentional programming aimed at maintaining connections between the campuses and Hispanic students and their families and communities. Hammang elaborates, "Hispanic students have to feel that they are a group who can make a difference on campus, but it's not the absolute number of Hispanic students that matters. Rather, it's their feeling that there are enough people to make a difference."

Several campuses discovered that involving families early on—often as early as the recruitment stage—was

a strong programmatic strategy for Hispanic student success. Boze says the TSUSM students she talked with came from large families, high schools and communities that were 95 percent Hispanic. Although TSUSM is 20 percent Hispanic, Boze notes “those students nevertheless had more than the usual first-year culture shock, leaving extended families and discovering that they are a minority.”

TSUSM also includes the family by providing materials and spaces that are intentionally family-focused and bilingual. Boze explains, “Students bring not just parents, but also their younger siblings with them to visit campus. So offices are family-friendly with plenty of seating, water coolers, television and toddler play areas.”

Examples of familial and pre-college involvement are seen on a number of campuses. At Northern Arizona University, the bilingual abilities of staff and the direct connections to parents (as reassurance) are considered major selling points. Likewise, George Mason University offers the Early Identification Program. This free community outreach initiative identifies and engages high-risk, high-potential 8th–12th grade students to encourage them to successfully complete a college-prep program and subsequently enroll in college. Also, at the University of Texas, Arlington, The Center for Mexican American Studies presents seminars for Spanish-speaking immigrant parents. Often times Spanish-speaking immigrants with children in K–12 public schools make presentations to help other parents navigate the educational system.

Another school that emphasizes familial involvement is Adams State College (ASC), located in south central Colorado. ASC study team leader Ron Hy, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Texas A&M-Kingsville, observed a variety of initiatives and programs that form an institutional support system for its students. “This college offers freshmen interest groups, integrated advising, academic support, one stop for student services, plus faculty development and advising on the retention of Hispanic students,” Hy says.

The 11 campuses visited are similar in that they all exhibit a mission and culture that is intentional and overt. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), team leader Pedro Martinez says his group was surprised to learn that instead of targeting one sect of students, the services and programs UCF provides are available to all students. Martinez,

provost at Winston-Salem State University, says this student success strategy came from a set of values promulgated by UCF leaders: “Everything that happens inside the classrooms and outside of classroom instruction is based on those values.”

**F**inally, success for Hispanic students was also visible in organizational leadership and development. Like the *Graduation Rate Study* findings, what mattered was the sense that student success was everyone’s responsibility on a campus. Hammang adds, “The study found that while the cultural change needed on a campus is easier to accomplish if leadership comes from the top, it is also successful when leadership comes from other levels.”

Team leader Hy explains that Adams State College is a case in point where Hispanic students’

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graduation rates successfully increased when faculty and staff were involved in efforts to help students. Hy remarks, “Equally important was the fact that administrators value the faculty and staff. A college or university doesn’t have to implement unique objectives to help students – it just must implement what it has very well.”

Another example of organizational leadership came from California State University Northridge. The study report notes that “presidential leadership over the past seven years has created an environment that allows for deeper collaboration, focused attention on critical goals (including increasing graduation rates, becoming learner-centered, and connecting to the local community), and facilitated dialogue in a way that has helped campus members more clearly see their role in supporting student success.”

The Hispanic Student Success report offers six recommendations to presidents and academic leaders to foster campus cultures and programs to retain and graduate Hispanic students:

- Make an explicit commitment to serving Hispanic students part of the institutional mission and all plans.
- Listen carefully to Hispanic students to determine their needs.
- Recognize the importance of family and community connections to Hispanic students.
- Work to replicate the family/community networks.
- Create a culture of success for Hispanic students through faculty/staff recruitment and development.
- Continuously evaluate programs and progress.

Mehaffy believes that AASCU's study visit process will lead colleges and universities to evaluate their institutional improvement. He says, "This process

shows us that the role of our institutions is more than just a 'take it or leave it' offer of education to young people. In today's world of global competitiveness, more and more young people have to have college degrees to compete and for the U.S. to compete. Our role now is to ensure that students succeed." Mehaffy anticipates that other member institutions will request a study team, and hopes all AASCU campuses take up the challenge to translate the report's insights and examples of best practices into the context of their own campus. **P**

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## The Hispanic Student Success Study Visit Process

Eleven AASCU member institutions were chosen to have study teams spend two days on their campus in the spring of 2007. Five member campuses were chosen for continuously high graduation rates with low gaps between the Hispanic and majority-student population, and six campuses were chosen for substantial improvements in Hispanic students' graduation rates since 2000. The participating schools included rural, urban, large and small institutions, and each campus had to have a Hispanic student body of five percent or more of the total student body.

Study teams of seven or eight people were formed from 84 volunteer members representing 75 different institutions that provided support and funding. Team leaders met with AASCU staff to understand the project's purpose and methodology, and assignments were based on the strengths and backgrounds of participating researchers. Study team leaders tailored the processes and protocols used in the Graduation Rate Outcomes Project to focus on factors that research literature suggested contributed to Hispanic students' success. Team leader Betsy Boze says that by the time the teams met face-to-face, they knew what they needed to accomplish, how to go about it, and the strengths of each team member. Additionally, each institution that contributed a visiting team member agreed to conduct a self-study of its own.

Pedro Martinez emphasized that this research was not driven by data, but instead was a study in human experience. "People sat down with us and told us their feelings and what they perceived to be important. This was invaluable in getting at the heart and soul of what people were thinking."

Team leaders wrote study visit reports that Peter Ewell consolidated into a cohesive draft and sent to team members. Via conference call, teams reviewed the draft for accuracy and offered recommendations and points of emphasis. The final report is dedicated to Donald S. Castro, special assistant to California State University Fullerton president, who passed away before the publication of the study. Castro led the George Mason University study team.

### Study Campuses

- Adams State College, Colorado
- Baruch College, New York
- California State University, Chico
- California State University Northridge
- George Mason University, Virginia
- Humboldt State University, California
- Northern Arizona University
- State University of New York, New Paltz
- Texas State University, San Marcos
- University of Central Florida
- University of Texas, Arlington