

College-Bound Latino Students At New High

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More Latino students are enrolling in college now than ever before, according to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center. But Latinos still lag behind other groups in preparing for and completing college. Guest host Viviana Hurtado discusses the report's findings with Richard Fry of the Pew Hispanic Center and the College Board's Jim Montoya.

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VIVIANA HURTADO, HOST:

I'm Viviana Hurtado and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Michel Martin is away. Coming up, the ladies of the Beauty Shop are here. They'll give their take on this week's hot news. First, a new report reveals more Latino students are enrolling in college than ever before. They now are the largest minority on college campuses. That's according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

But Latino students still lag behind their peers in college success and graduation. For the story behind these numbers we've invited two college experts. Richard Fry is a senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center. He is a co-author of the new report.

Also with us is James Montoya. He's a vice president at the non-profit College Board. He's also the former dean of admissions at Stanford University and advisor to Hispanic students. Welcome to you both.

RICHARD FRY: Thank you so much.

JAMES MONTOYA: Great to be here.

HURTADO: Richard Fry, we're going to start with you. Your report found that 16.5 percent of college students are now Latino. So let's put it in context. Five years ago it was only 11 percent. How significant is this jump?

FRY: That's a very significant jump and I think when I sort of look at the numbers, I don't focus on the absolutes; I tend to focus on those percentages. And in the short space of five years Latino representation has quickly increased from 11 percent among young college students to 16.5 percent.

And in the course of that, as a result of that growth, in 2010 Latinos became the largest minority on our nation's college campuses and now in 2011 they're the nation's largest minority on the nation's four-year colleges and universities, which is significant when we get into things like degree completion.

HURTADO: What accounts for this increase?

FRY: I think mechanically three things. Latinos are a young population, including - they and Asian-Americans are the growing groups of youth. But as the report shows, it's more than simply demographics. In addition, more of them are eligible for college because now more than three-quarters of young Latinos have finished high school.

You want to go to college in America, you've got to finish high school. So basically, I'm saying more Latinos are eligible. And then the third factor is of those eligible, now more than 46 percent of them are actually enrolled in either a two-year or a four-year college.

HURTADO: So we've got at least three things going on - sheer numbers; we've got great eligibility because they're doing a better job finishing high school; and then we're also doing a better job of getting those that are eligible to actually enroll and pursue college.

James, let's move to you. Who are these students that are now attending college?

MONTOYA: Well, it's a very diverse group. It not only includes those who are coming directly from high school but also returning students - Latinos who are in their 20s, often with families. But I think what's really interesting to note is that we are seeing the entry point for nearly half of Latino students as being the community colleges, the two-year institutions.

And again, they play a very important role as students step onto a college campus.

HURTADO: And that's because it's more accessible because they maybe qualify academically to go to two-year college before they go to a four-year?

MONTOYA: I think it's a variety of issues. I think it includes the accessibility and the relatively low cost of community colleges, but I also think that this speaks to the fact that not all Latino families - in fact, a significant portion of Latino families - simply do not have what I would call high quality information on college options.

And this is something that's very important to the College Board in our work with the Latino community through our town hall meetings, through our Big Futures website, which is a new website we have on college planning, whether it be through our just programs and services, helping Latino families and all families have a better understanding of the options out there, including two-year and four-year college opportunities, including financial aid, knowing that cost is a huge factor on the minds of Latino students and families.

HURTADO: I want to play a short clip from Lucero Castaneda (ph). She's a student at the University of Oregon. She was born in Mexico and neither of her parents finished high school but she told us she and all seven of her siblings have attended college.

LUCERO CASTANEDA: For me and my family education has always been a really large part of us growing up. And so going to college wasn't really a question whether I was going to go or I wasn't going to go but it was more a matter of how was I going to pay for it.

HURTADO: And you were kind of getting at that, James Montoya, when you were talking about some of the challenges that these students face as well as how is it that you get the information out there to help these students overcome these obstacles. James, is Lucero's story common?

MONTOYA: I think we want it to be more common and by that I mean it's very clear that within the Latino community there are high aspirations for Latino children, particularly in terms of college. But moving from college aspiration to college success - first, gaining admission to college and having the financial resources to attend college, and then ending up on the graduation stage is something that we need to remain focused on.

What is very clear and one of the reasons that this story, I believe, is so important is that we cannot underestimate the essential role that Latinos in the U.S. will play in reaching our national goal of 55 to

60 percent of young Americans 25 to 34 having a college degree. I mean, this of course is to keep the U.S. as a leader in an increasingly global economy and Latinos and college graduates who are Latinos are going to play a big role.

HURTADO: Richard Fry, returning back to you. Latinos still have the highest high school dropout rate of any racial group so it was unexpected for a lot of us who follow these issues that we'd see such a large increase in college enrollment. So how do you explain this apparent contradiction? How do you square these facts?

FRY: It's not contradictory when you sort of first acknowledge they do have the highest - of the major ethnic groups - the high dropout rate. And, for example, earlier I said that about now more than three-quarters of young Latinos have finished high school. That's good. That's now 76 percent but it still trails white, black and Asian youth.

For example, among the whites it's probably closer to 85 percent. So, yes, their dropout rate is declining. Their completion rates are rising. They still trail whites and other groups but the story here is, is that many of them are college eligible and increasingly we're succeeding in having them pursue college.

HURTADO: If you're just joining us, you're listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Viviana Hurtado. We're talking about a new report from the Pew Hispanic Center. It shows a sharp jump in the number of Latino students enrolled in college and we're getting the story behind that from Richard Fry of Pew and James Montoya of the College Board.

So according to the Department of Education, around one-third of Latino students who start college actually graduate. James Montoya, why do you think so many are enrolling in college but then there's the hurdle, right, of getting their degrees and they're just not getting it?

MONTOYA: Viviana, this is the right question to be asking. I just returned from California where I met with the White House Commission on Education Excellence for Hispanics and we were discussing this very important issue. Just let me use as an example, in California for every hundred Latinos who enter higher education, 80 percent, again, will start at community colleges.

In California in a recent report that was presented to us by Professor Daniel Solorzano from UCLA, he pointed out that a significant portion, somewhere between 75 to 90 percent, need remedial education. So I think we have to remain focused on academic preparation and focused on college readiness for the Latino population, because so many are starting at a disadvantage needing remedial courses, which you know, ultimately, are not transferrable to four-year colleges and universities.

HURTADO: So does that really, James, put the burden on colleges because - talk to us a little bit more about what colleges have to do with these students that come to them, as far as not just recruiting them, but retaining students and actually getting them to graduate.

MONTOYA: Well, let me use the example, once again, of students who enter either a two-year or a four-year institution needing developmental education, courses particularly focused on mathematics and English. I believe we need to invest heavily in those courses and making sure that they are of the highest quality and that offer a student a real opportunity to be successful because, quite honestly, not as many who enter these developmental courses will actually complete the courses and move into a traditional university curriculum.

So one area that I think is very important is, of course, making these courses the best they can possibly be with the intent of making as many students successful and, as quickly as possible, moving into

courses that will be eligible for college and university credit.

HURTADO: And Richard Fry, our data specialist, looking into your data crystal ball, are we going to see enrollment among Latino students continue to rise?

FRY: I would suspect, just in terms of the sheer demographics of it, yes. The absolute enrollment counts will go up. However, I would suggest that that's not a very high bar. Again, if you actually look at the percentages, we noted initially that most of this gain has been since 2006, 2007. Well, that happens to coincide with the onset of the Great Recession. That's implied very difficult employment opportunities, particularly for young adults.

And so what I'm concerned about - and I don't know the answer to this - is how much of these enrollment gains is because of the very poor job market prospects facing some youth. Some high school graduates coming out of high school, they want to go to college. But some of them, if given a choice, would rather work. And so when the job market improves, we'll still see if we can keep these great numbers of Latinos enrolled.

HURTADO: And that was Richard Fry speaking. He's a senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center. He co-authored a new report on Hispanic student enrollment and joined us here in our Washington, D.C. studio. Also with us, James Montoya, vice president at the nonprofit College Board. He's worked in higher education for nearly 40 years, including as the dean of admissions at Stanford University, and he was with us from our studios in New York.

Thank you both, gentlemen.

MONTOYA: Thank you.

FRY: Thank you.

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