

LATINOS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Enrollment and Completion

Latinos* are one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the United States. Latino children account for one in four K-12 students and one in five college students in the United States. In 2016, a third of the over 57 million Latinos in the country were under 18 years of age.¹ Latino students are also completing high school at a record rate: 79% of Latino students earned a high school diploma in 2016 compared to 71% in 2010.² Further, in 2016, Hispanic high school graduates enrolled in college[†] at a slightly higher rate than Whites (72% vs. 70%).³

These gains have contributed to a record number of Latinos enrolling in postsecondary programs: between 1990 and 2016 Hispanic enrollment in postsecondary programs increased 337%—from 782,400 to 3.4 million students.⁴ In 2016, Latinos comprised nearly 19% of total undergraduate enrollment, up from 6% in 1990.⁵

Although Latinos are making strides in higher education enrollment, significant gaps persist, especially at the bachelor's degree level. Latino students continue to fare worse than their peers in degree attainment, and despite increased college attendance rates, Latinos across the nation have lost ground on closing the higher education completion gap with White students since 2001.⁶

Latinos of all ages still lag significantly in educational attainment. Latinos age 25 years and over are still only half as likely as Whites to have a bachelor's degree (11% compared to 20%, respectively).⁷ This is partly because Latinos are less likely to complete their degree than their White peers.⁸ Entering a postsecondary institution but not graduating, especially if students take on student loans, threatens Latino economic security and wealth building opportunities.

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† The terms college, postsecondary, and higher education are used interchangeably. They include a range of institution types, including two-year colleges that lead to a certificate or an associate degree (community colleges, vocational-technical colleges and career colleges), and four-year programs that lead to a bachelor's degree.

Addressing these disparities is crucial for the country’s economic security, as economic growth will increasingly rely on a credentialed Latino workforce. By 2050, Latinos are projected to comprise 30% of the nation’s workforce, doubled from their share in 2010, and by 2020, 65% of all jobs will require some training beyond high school.^{9, 10}

It is in the national interest to ensure Latino students have access to affordable, high-quality postsecondary programs through which they can obtain a degree or credential and enter the workforce career-ready. The following brief provides a snapshot of what today’s Latino students look like, where they are enrolled, and how many graduate from their program of study.

Education Indicators, 2016	Latinos	Whites
High School Graduation Rate	79%	88%
High School Graduates Enrolled in College	72%	70%
Undergraduate Enrollment and Proportion (in thousands)	3,167,164 (19%)	9,082,071 (54%)
Completion Rate, Four-Year	54%	63%
Completion Rate, Two-Year	19%	25%
Age 25+ with a Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	15%	33%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2017.

Today’s Latino undergraduates

Over time, as postsecondary education has become more accessible, the “traditional” student is no longer an 18-year-old unmarried, dependent, recent high school graduate. The profile of college-goers has shifted to include older students, majority women, more students of color, student parents, and students working full-time.¹¹ In addition to these trends, Latino college-goers are also more likely to be first-generation college students, attend school part time, and have substantial financial need than their white peers.

Latino undergraduate students in 2016:



- **The average age was 25-years-old.** The Latino population as a whole is slightly younger than other racial and ethnic groups, and the average age of students mirrors this trend.¹²



- **Among Latino undergraduates, 58% are women,** compared to 55% of White undergraduates.¹³



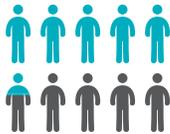
- **Seventy percent of Latino students were first-generation* college-goers,** compared to 48% of White students.¹⁴



- **Latino students were more likely to attend school exclusively part-time** than other racial or ethnic groups (37% compared to 32% of Whites).



- **Forty-seven percent of Latino undergraduates are independent students,** meaning they are older than 24, married, have dependent children or were a veteran.¹⁵



- **Nearly half of Latino students (48%) had an expected family contribution of \$0—**meaning a federal formula determined their assets were not sufficient to be able to contribute to college costs.

Latino undergraduate enrollment

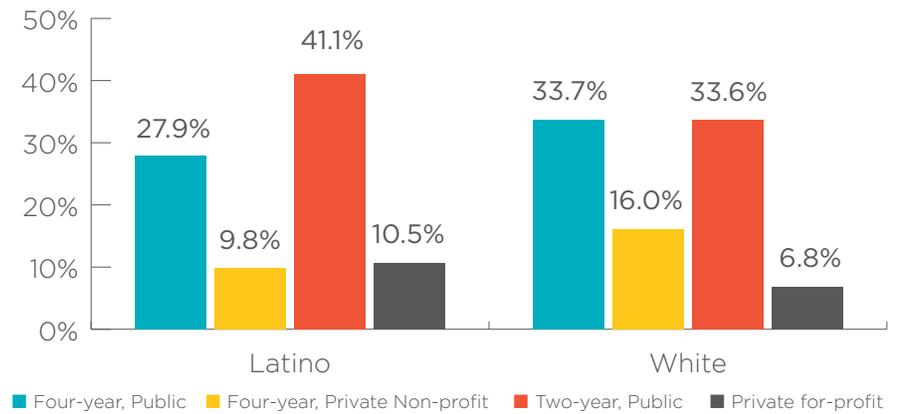
Between 2000 and 2016, the college enrollment rate for Latino 18- to 24-year-olds increased from 22% to 39%.¹⁶ Despite this substantial increase, Latinos remain underrepresented in college. Additionally, Latinos are more likely than their White peers to be enrolled at public two-year and for-profit institutions.

Latinos remain underrepresented in undergraduate programs and are most likely to attend two-year colleges.

- In 2016, Latinos represented 22% of 18-to-24-year-olds, but only accounted for 19% of those enrolled in undergraduate programs.¹⁷
- In 2016, 41% of Latino undergraduates were enrolled in two-year institutions, while nearly 30% attended public four-year institutions (Figure 1).

* First-generation is defined here as students whose parents have not obtained, at minimum, a bachelor's degree.

Figure 1. Institution Sector by Race and Ethnicity, Latino and White



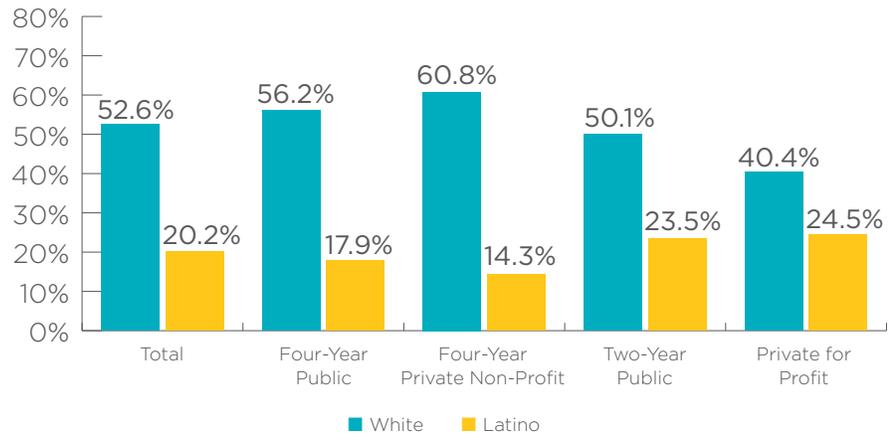
Note: Total does not add up to 100 percent due to the missing percent of students who attended more than one type of institution.

Source: UnidosUS calculation using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, NPSAS:16." Washington, DC, 2017.

Compared to their representation among all U.S. undergraduates, Latino undergraduates are overrepresented at public two-year and for-profit institutions.

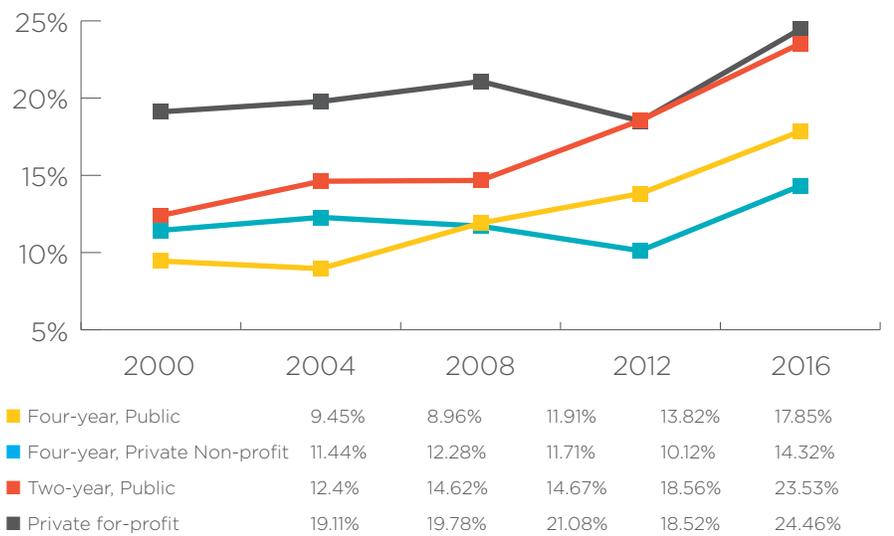
- While Latinos represent 20% of undergraduates overall, they comprise 23.5% of students enrolled at public two-year colleges and 24.5% of those enrolled in for-profit institutions (Figure 2).¹⁸
- Latino representation across all institutions has increased. However, this trend also means that Latinos account for more of the private for-profit student body in 2016 than in 2000.¹⁹
- Even as Latino students are accounting for more of the student body across all postsecondary institutions due to population growth, Latinos have yet to reach proportionate representation of the student population in public four-year and private nonprofit institutions.

Figure 2. Share of Latino and White Students Enrolled by Institution, 2015-2016



Source: UnidosUS calculation using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, NPSAS:16." Washington, DC, 2017.

Figure 3. Latino Enrollment by Institution Overtime



Source: UnidosUS calculation using U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, NPSAS:16." Washington, DC, 2017.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Among Latinos enrolled in postsecondary programs, the majority of Latino undergraduate students (65%) attend a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI).^{*20} HSIs are public or private non-profit schools with student populations that are at least 25% Latino, enroll a high concentration of low-income students, and have low core expenses. The U.S. Department of Education began officially recognizing and designating HSIs following the creation of the Developing HSIs Program in 1994.²¹ HSIs now account for 15% of all institutions of higher education, and the number of HSIs has doubled over the past 20 years.^{†22} As the Latino population grows, HSIs are also expected to increase. Excelencia in Education has identified 333 higher education institutions as emerging HSIs because between 15% and 24.9% of their enrolled students are Latino.²³

Nearly half of the currently identified 492 HSIs in the country are two-year colleges, with many located in geographic proximity to Latino students.²⁴ HSIs play an important role in educating Latino students, yet while HSIs serve low-income students, these institutions are often under resourced themselves. On average, HSIs produce better graduation outcomes for Latino students compared with non-HSIs and also tend to have smaller completion gaps between White and Latino students.²⁵

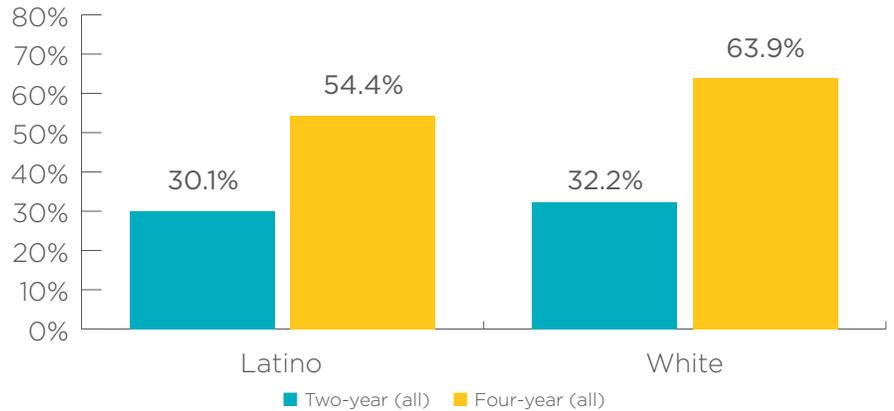
* HSIs are eligible for federal funding under Title V through a competitive grant to enhance academic quality and to improve educational opportunities for Latinos and other low-income students.

† HSIs count both full-time and part-time students in determining their Hispanic student population, different than the calculation method utilized by other minority-serving institutions.

Latino undergraduate graduation outcomes

Latinos' impressive gains in college enrollment over the last decade and a half are encouraging, but without equal success in graduation, Latinos are not gaining access to the benefits of a college degree. Graduation is a crucial determinant in whether students benefit from the higher education wage premium. Those with a postsecondary degree have median earnings that are nearly \$25,000 higher per year than those with only a high school diploma.²⁶ For Latinos, median earnings are 23% higher for those with an associate degree and 66% higher for those with a bachelor's degree, compared to median earnings for those with no more than a high school diploma.²⁷

Figure 4. Graduation Rate from First Institution Attended, Latino and White



Note: Graduation rate is based on the number of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students completing their program within 150% divided by the number of students in the entering cohort.

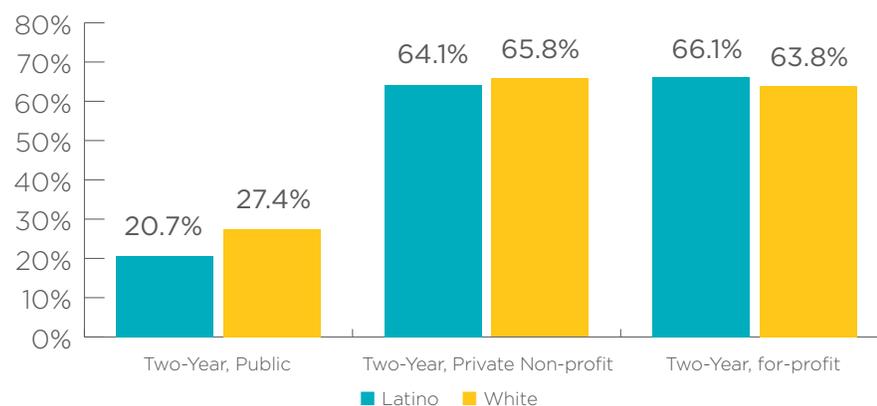
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Digest of Education Statistics," Tables 326.10 and 326.20, Washington, DC, 2017.

Latino graduation rates* vary by institution type but are lowest at two-year public institutions and consistently lower than those of White students at every institution type.

- In 2017, at two-year public institutions—where most Latino students are enrolled— only 21% of Latinos graduated, compared to 27% of White students (Figure 5).²⁸
- The graduation rate for Latinos in four-year institutions was 54%, compared to 64% for White students (Figure 6).²⁹
- While two-year colleges are more affordable than four-year colleges, this cost-saving advantage is rendered null if students do not graduate or transfer to a four-year program.

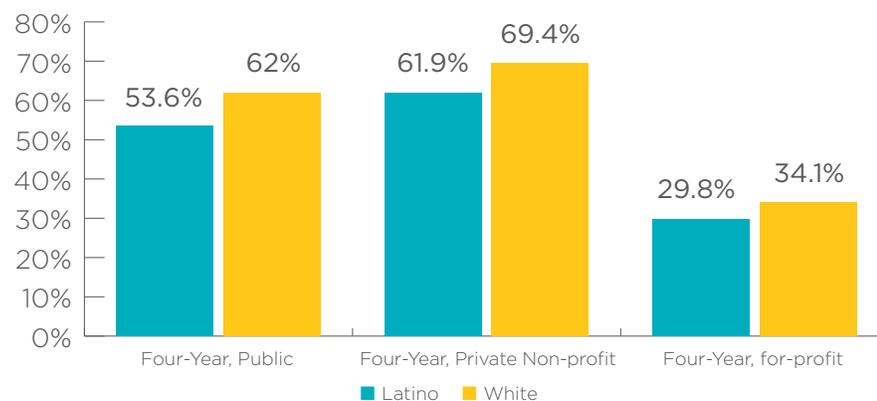
* The graduation rate is based on the number of full-time, first-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students completing their program within 150% divided by the number of students in the entering cohort. The data does not account for the completion of degrees by students who graduate from an institution different than the one at which they began.

Figure 5. Three-Year Graduation Rate from First Institution Attended, Two-Year Institutions, Latino and White



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Digest of Education Statistics," Table 326.20, Washington, DC, 2017.

Figure 6. Six-Year Graduation Rate from First Institution Attended, Four-Year Institutions, Latino and White



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Digest of Education Statistics," Table 326.10, Washington, DC, 2017.

The Latino-White graduation gap has widened over time. Latino graduation rate gap at two-year institutions* remains unchanged from 2003 but has narrowed at four-year colleges.

- Overall, the Latino-White graduation gap has widened since 2003, due to increases in White graduation (31.5% to 32.2%) as well as student population.³⁰
- The Latino-White graduation gap was 1.4 percentage points in 2003, compared to 2.1 percentage points in 2016.³¹
- Between 2002 and 2016 the Latino-White graduation gap narrowed at four-year institutions from 12.4 percentage points in 2002 to 9.5 percentage points in 2016.

* For two-year institutions, graduation data account for those graduating within three years (150% of normal graduation time). Accordingly, graduation data account for students graduating within six years at four-year institutions.

For-Profit Institutions

Though Latino graduation rates are higher at two-year for-profits compared to other institutions, data show students at for-profit colleges, including students of color, pay more in tuition, have more debt, and are more likely to default than students of color that attend public and nonprofit institutions.³⁴ Further, studies show that students with for-profit credentials may not have better chances in the job market than those without a credential or a credential from a less expensive community college.³⁵

- In 2016, the Latino graduation rate at two-year institutions was 30.1%, the same as 2003.³²
- While Latinos are most likely to be enrolled in public two-year colleges, these institutions have the lowest graduation rates for Latinos among two-year institutions and saw the smallest increases in the Latino graduation rate among two-year institutions between 2003 and 2016.³³ This is compared to White students, who are slightly more likely to be enrolled in public four-year institutions where graduation outcomes improved from 2003 and 2016.

Latino students continue to be enrolled beyond the traditional period often measured for successful completion and are less likely to transfer out of two-year colleges than White students.

- According to one study, after six years, 49.6% of Latinos had completed their certificate or degree, and another 17.4% were still enrolled.³⁶
- The proportion of enrolled students beyond the six-year window is largest at two-year schools; one in five Latinos is still enrolled after six years at two-year public schools.
- Overall, 13.2% of Latino students who start at a two-year school end up completing at a four-year school (7.2% receive their Associates and then transfer, and 6.0% transfer before receiving their Associates), compared to 20.8% of White students (10.3% with Associate's and 10.5% without).³⁷

While Latino Students are more likely to graduate at selective colleges, one quarter of Latino students scoring in the top SAT quartile attend two-year institutions in 2016.

- Latino students are most likely to graduate at selective institutions where the acceptance rate is less than 25%. In 2016, 81.0% of Latinos at selective institutions graduated, compared to 30.1% attending institutions with open admissions.³⁸
- In 2016, 35% of Latino students scoring in the top quartile of the SAT attended four-year public universities, 25% attended public two-year institutions, and 15% attended private four-year institutions.³⁹

Barriers to Completion for Latino and First-Generation Students

Many factors play a role in a student's decision to leave school before graduating, with Latinos and first-generation college-goers facing particular hurdles to completion. According to a Federal Reserve Board Survey, Latinos were more likely than Whites or Blacks to say they left school and did not complete because it was too expensive.⁴⁰ This may be compounded by the confusing financial aid system that many first-generation students must navigate largely on their own.

If students do not file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) each year they are enrolled, they are ineligible for federal and some state and institution aid. Undocumented students, many of whom are first-generation college students, face additional hurdles to completing the FAFSA due to existing policies that bar undocumented students from being eligible to receive any form of federal financial aid. U.S. citizen children with undocumented parents also face challenges to completing the FAFSA, which may impact their ability to receive financial aid. Further, many Latino students have family or work obligations that can take time away from their academic work and may attend college part-time, making completion more difficult. Finally, first-generation students experience social isolation and struggle with spanning the cultural divide between the college campus and their home life.⁴¹

Conclusion

Despite encouraging increases in Latino enrollment rates over the past decade or so, disparities between Latinos and their White peers persist. Far too many Latinos entering the higher education system with hopes of improving their outcomes are facing barriers to graduation and too many are failing to complete school and carrying high levels of student loan debt. To ensure the American economy can rely on an educated and career-ready Latino workforce, federal and state policies must work to ensure that students have access to programs that allow students to succeed.

Endnotes

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