

Hispanics face college pitfalls

Study: Money, family challenges hurt graduation rate

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Daniel Nuñez never thought his journey to a diploma and a well-paying career would be filled with so many pitfalls, so many hurdles.

The Phoenix College student put off college until 2000, four years after graduating from high school. He then dropped out to take care of his ailing grandparents. He's a single father working a part-time job while attending classes.

Today, after spending more than \$15,000 during the past four years, the 26-year-old Glendale resident hasn't yet earned his associate's degree and worries it will take another few years and thousands of dollars more to graduate from college.

Nuñez is like many Hispanic college students, according to a new national study, "Latino Youth Finishing College: The Role of Selective Pathways," by the Pew Hispanic Center. The study indicates that Latinos do not graduate as often or as quickly as Anglo students and that many attend less-demanding schools that may impede their graduation track.

Aware that some Latinos struggle to complete a degree program or to even stay in college, many schools such as Arizona State University and Phoenix College have developed counseling and peer programs to keep the students enrolled.

Hispanic youths face challenges that Anglo counterparts may not, including a delayed entry to college and the tendency to live at home with family. They generally attend "less-selective schools" or colleges that are less restrictive when admitting students. What's more, Latinos are nearly twice as likely as Anglo students to have children or elderly dependents to care for and are more likely than Anglo undergraduates to be single parents, the report says.

Also Valley trend

Hispanic students in the Valley mirror some of the national trends.

During a six-year period from 1997 to the 2002-2003 school year, 44.4 percent of Hispanic students graduated from ASU, compared with 53.5 percent of Anglos, according to ASU.

Across town at Phoenix College, 24 percent of students who identified themselves as Hispanic earned associate's degrees, compared with 53 percent who identified themselves as Anglo.

Keeping students enrolled can be an uphill battle.

"Many (Hispanic) families, especially first-generation-college families who do not have access to early child care or pre-kindergarten education, (are) starting out behind when they get here," said Phoenix College President Corina Gardea, adding that it's hard for those students to catch up.

"When they graduate from high school, they're not reading at level. When they come to college, they have to start out at developmental college, which are not college-level courses."

Choice of school is key

The Pew study measured the quality of college outcomes for equally prepared high school youths of different racial and ethnic groups. The report is based on figures collected by the U.S. Department of Education over 12 years. The survey tracked the educational paths of 25,000 students from the time they were in eighth grade until 2000, when most were 26.

"Part of the reason Latinos are trailing is partly because of the colleges they choose," said Richard Fry, Pew's senior research associate. "Unfortunately, Latino students are picking schools that aren't successful at getting their students to graduate."

About 23 percent of undergraduate Latinos are likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age 26, compared with about 47 percent of Anglo students, the study says. Nearly 60 percent of Latino undergraduates attend non-selective colleges and universities compared with 52 percent of Anglo students, researchers said.

"I wasn't prepared," said Nuñez, the first of his nine siblings to pursue a college degree. "I had family pressure. There was a lack of resources. I have parents that are either incapable or unwilling of assisting me."

The challenge of graduating isn't unique to Latinos.

Students from all ethnicities are confronted with family challenges, limited campus participation and affordability issues, and many two-year colleges and large urban universities such as ASU face difficulties in graduating students.

Still, the study points out, the issues are more severe among Latino students.

External responsibilities bumped back Carlos Zubiata's college graduation. The ASU junior, who is in his fifth year, lives with his family in Chandler and has a part-time job.

"I've always been jealous of the kids that live on campus," said Zubiata, 22, a housing and urban development major. "When you're living on campus, you're focused, you're in a college environment. I come home, and I can't sit down and read because there's all these distractions, more responsibilities. For those that have families, jobs and school, we can't focus."

Adjustment problems

So grades suffer, financial aid racks up and some drop out.

Phoenix College, popular with Hispanic students, offers classes to high school students to prepare them. It's critical to retaining first-generation Latino students, who have a tough time adjusting to college life, Gardea said.

"Hispanic families are at that first step, meaning they have gotten a key and they're opening this door to education, not having any idea of what to expect," said Gardea, a Latina. "It's a tough road to college with Latinos. Getting their arms around what is college and . . . How do I navigate what college is?"

ASU, which last year had about 6,000 Latino students, offers programs to boost success and ease the transition.

The Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program and the Freshman Year Experience are the schools' most successful programs, said Jim Rund, vice president for undergraduate initiatives. College officials also launched a partnership with the

Tolleson High School District to increase its pipeline of historically underrepresented students, Rund said.

That kind of assistance and motivational programs are key for Hispanics to graduate, according to the study.

Phoenix College student Viviana Ybarra wasn't sure she could handle a four-year university. Community college, she said, was a comfortable move from a private Catholic high school. She plans to transfer to a four-year college after earning an associate's degree in education.

"I can understand how it can be overwhelming and intimidating," the sophomore from south Phoenix said. "My parents are very supportive in encouraging me to pursue my education. Phoenix College is challenging for me but not challenging enough that I'm going to get behind or have to drop out."

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