Latinx students who graduate from high school are less likely than their White counterparts to start off at a four-year university and more likely to enter higher education through the community college system (Kurlaender, 2006). In Texas, an overall 53% of students chose community college as their entry point into higher education, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2013); of those, 25% eventually transferred to a four-year institution within six years (THECB, 2014). The National Center of Education Statistics (2013) data indicate that 46% of all Latinx students in U.S. higher education are enrolled at a community college. However, Latinx transfer rates to four-year universities were disproportionately low among all transfer students (National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2011). In fact, more than 60% of Latinx students in postsecondary education begin their college careers in the community college, but fewer than 1% transfer to four-year colleges and universities (Yosso and Solórzano, 2006).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This article contextualizes some of the issues that affect Latinx community college students’ limitations, affordances, and experiences in accessing higher education, specifically those related to transferring to four-year colleges and universities in Texas. The aim of this brief is to draw attention to these universities’ efforts to increase the access, retention, and graduation rates for Latinx community college students in Texas.

SCHOOLING CONDITIONS THAT LEAD LATINX STUDENTS INTO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

According to Valencia (2002), Latinx student failure is often the result of historic school segregation and the consequent limitations in the learning opportunities afforded to African American and Mexican American students in Texas public schools. Using data from the Austin Independent School District (AISD), Valencia (2000) demonstrates that segregated schools produce inferior schooling and diminish academic performance, evidenced by lower scores on high stakes standardized tests; an increase in the percentage of minority student enrollment in AISD schools correlated with an increase in the percentage of students who failed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). In the same study, Valencia (2000) also found that students who attended high minority schools were more likely to be taught by noncertified teachers, who in turn were often more likely to teach in schools with lower test scores, indicating that there is a direct correlation between teacher certification and students’ test performance. Given the sociopolitical context of education in Texas, Latinx/Tejano students, especially those of low socioeconomic backgrounds, generally have limited opportunities for positive learning, making it difficult for them to be academically prepared for enrollment at four-year colleges or universities. Coupled with dwindling funding opportunities, Latinx/Tejano students are often funneled to community college systems as their only option for entry into higher education.

WHAT STUDENTS NEED FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

In Texas, Lanaan and Starobin (2004) found that students generally believed their future success at the university depended on their community college improving their transfer articulation agreements because this would ensure that their prerequisite classes to transfer were completed. Students also identified the need to have supportive advisors to assist with the transfer process and, especially, the need to be introduced to the admissions office at the four-year college. Addressing the Latinx transfer gap, Núñez and Elizondo (2013) echo some of Lanaan and Starobin’s (2004) findings regarding students’ attitudes and behaviors around the transfer process. They make the following suggestions regarding areas where community college personnel can work to improve the experience for Latinx students during their time at the community college by (a) building relationships with community college faculty and staff; (b) providing access to critical information about how to navigate the community college/four-year university systems; and (c) ensuring that the community college is an affirming and welcoming environment for Latinx students with similar backgrounds.

AFFIRMING TRANSFER MODELS

Researchers and practitioners have developed affirming transfer culture models in an effort to diminish the institutional barriers and strengthen the transfer function from community colleges to four-year universities for Latinx/Tejano students (Handel, 2012; Herrera and Jain, 2013; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano, 2011; and Pérez and Ceja 2010). Two such models are the “Emerging Transfer Culture Model” by Handel (2012) and “A Latinx Transfer Culture Model” by Pérez and Ceja (2010). The transfer-affirming culture model mandates that four-year institutions recognize their role in the transfer function. It asks both the community college and the four-year university to make transfer commitments an institutional priority: by actively engaging students during the pre-transfer activities of the transfer process, by having high expectations, and by supporting students throughout the completion of their bachelor’s degrees. The model outlined by Pérez and Ceja highlights the need to increase the number of Latinx faculty and staff in higher education, especially because they often reflect the cultural values of Latinx students and can become sources of support and mentorship (Urrieta and Méndez Benaví-dez, 2007).

FINDINGS FROM THE SIX CASE STUDIES

The case studies at six institutions in Texas highlight promising efforts geared to assisting potential transfer students at six Texas universities. These universities

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CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Creating transfer policies and transfer student programming that focuses on Latinx/Tejano community college student transfer culture in Texas is of critical importance. Failure to address these issues will result in the continuation of a disproportionately low rate of Latinx/Tejano community college students transferring to four-year institutions and, more generally, to the lack of Latinx achievement and attainment in higher education. We conclude that public four-year universities, including the six Texas universities we profiled in this article, should develop transfer policies and practices specific to the needs of Latinx community college students. These might include: (1) the development of culturally relevant outreach programs focusing on the specific needs—including the financial needs—of Latinx community college students; (2) the development of guaranteed admission pathways into four-year universities for Latinx community college students; and (3) the development of programming specific to increasing the retention and graduation of Latinx community college transfer students. This should include financial aid awards and scholarships specifically for Latinx community college transfer students. The demographic imperative surrounding this issue highlights the urgency with which these access, retention, and graduation efforts must be advanced, especially in Texas.

REFERENCES


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