

Hispanics in Higher Education

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Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO

Hispanics represent approximately 14 percent of the traditional college bound population of 18 to 23 year olds. Forty-seven percent of this population lives in the West. By the year 2010, Hispanics will account for 17 percent of the U.S. population. In spite of this growth, Hispanics currently account for only 9 percent of total college enrollment. When compared to Whites, Hispanics' chances of dropping out from college are 13 percent higher. If these college participation and dropout rates continue, Hispanics will be less likely to secure the social and economic benefits associated with a college degree as compared to Whites. This entry summarizes current information about the college choices, college destinations, collegiate experiences and degree attainment for the Hispanic student population.

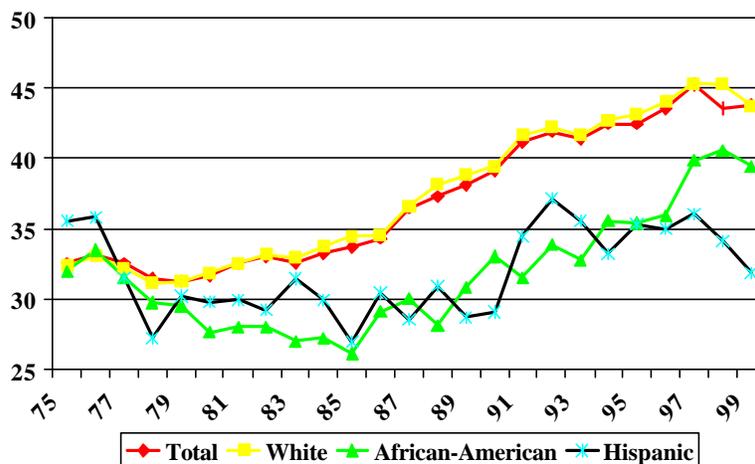
*Hispanics as a diverse group.* The term Hispanic is used to refer to a highly diversified group of people whose values and way of behaving amalgamate Asian, Native American, African and Spanish cultures. Among the groups embraced by this term, one can find 'Chicanos', 'Latinos', 'Puerto Ricans' and 'Cubans' which describe different migration patterns from Mexico, Central and South America, Puerto Rico and Cuba. To some, these terms co notate recent migration status; however many Hispanic communities can trace their origins to prior to the emergence of United States. Other Hispanics may be first generation Americans. Socioeconomically speaking, the Hispanic community is also diverse. Median family incomes and educational attainment tend to be highest among Hispanics of Cuban origin while the lowest tend to be concentrated among Hispanics of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent.

*College choice.* Regardless of ethnicity, all high school students have similar chances to enroll in higher education when they plan for college, secure college qualifications, graduate from high school and actually apply to a four-year institution. However, next to their White counterparts, Hispanics, on the average, are 20 percent less likely to secure college qualifications, are 9 percent less likely to graduate from high school, and are 16 percent less likely to submit applications for a 4-year institution. Family support, parental encouragement, family socioeconomic status and the presence of at-risk factors facilitate or impede the completion of these college preparatory tasks. Compared to Whites, Hispanics are in a disadvantaged position when considering these factors: they are more prone to have parents with no collegiate experiences, their parents participate less in their school activities, they are slightly more likely to have been raised by single parent families, they have older siblings who dropout from high school, and they are more likely to have a history of low academic performance prior to high school enrollment. These factors contribute to the gaps in each of the steps towards college.

*College enrollment.* During the last 25 years the college participation rates among 18-24 year old

high school graduates of Hispanic and African-American origins has been uneven (see Figure 1). Between 1975 and 1977 college participation rates among Hispanics averaged almost 34 percent per year. In 1978, Hispanics' college participation rate plummeted to a record low of 27 percent. College attendance among Hispanics started to improve since the late 1980s. From 1988 to 1997, Hispanic enrollment rates increased by 79 percent. However, the last two years have witnessed a drop in college Hispanic college participation rate from 36% in 1997 to 32% in 1999, a decline that correlates with changes in college admission criteria. College participation rates are also irregular in terms of gender: more women than men enroll. Despite enrollment increases, Hispanics are under-represented relative to their share of the total population (9 percent vs. 14 percent); moreover their college participation rate is 9 percent below that of Whites' (36 percent vs. 45.1 percent). Several hypotheses have been advanced to account for the uneven enrollment exhibited by Hispanics during the last 25 years. These include: changes in college aspirations, changes in high school completion rates, academic readiness for college, socioeconomic status, changes in college admissions criteria, changes in the composition of financial aid packages from grants to loans, increasing cost of higher education exceeding minorities' ability to pay for college and minorities' reluctance to use loans as the main mechanism to finance college.

Figure 1. College Participation Rates Among 18- 24 year Old High School Graduates



Based on data provided in Wilds, D. 2000. *Minorities in Higher Education: 1999-2000: 17th Annual Status Report*. Washington, DC.: American Council on Education and The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001, August. *Almanac Issue: 2001-2*.

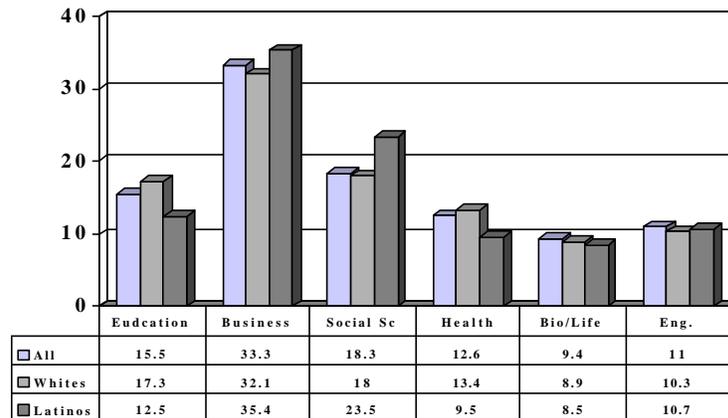
*College destinations.* Hispanics enroll in college immediately upon graduation from high school at rates comparable to Whites' (66 percent vs. 68 percent). Unlike Whites, Hispanics tend to choose community colleges as their main point of entry into postsecondary education, and this behavior tends to reflect finances and family considerations restricting their institutional choice. This trend is particularly troublesome given the low resources community colleges have to address students' needs, the high attrition rates found for minorities and the low proportion of community college students who actually transfer to four-year institutions and subsequently secure a bachelor's degree. In terms of four-year institutions and regions, Hispanics tend to enroll in

Hispanic-serving institutions concentrated in five states: California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois.

*College experiences.* Though nearly 50 percent of all college students attend on a part-time basis, Hispanics enroll part-time at rates higher than those of Whites (45 percent vs. 39 percent). Also, Hispanics take more than six years to secure a college degree while borrowing less to finance their college education. Hispanics are more likely than Whites to dropout from a 4-year institution (54.4 percent vs. 41.5 percent). In the two-year sector, however, Hispanics are just as likely to interrupt their enrollment in the first year as are Whites (41 percent vs. 42.5 percent). Hispanics are less likely to transfer from a two-year institution to a 4-year institution. Reasons advanced to explain the high incidence of dropout behavior and poor transfer rates include: a) insufficient academic preparation for college, b) exposure to a campus' climate of prejudice and discrimination, c) the nature and character of the classroom and out-of-classroom experiences, d) financial problems, e) family and work responsibilities, and f) encouragement and support from family and friends. Some successful intervention strategies to encourage persistence and transferring to a 4-year institution include: positive interactions with faculty, providing encouragement, active and collaborative learning, integrated curriculum, multicultural education, study and learning workshops and work-study programs. Other strategies recognize the importance of support services, including counseling and advising programs, workshops on diversity and the use of validation strategies in- and out-of-the classroom. Still others emphasize ethnic enclaves in the campus as a mechanism to facilitate transition into the academic and social lives of the institution. Also, attention has been given to architectural designs that foster pro-active and positive interactions between faculty and among students.

*Degree attainment.* At the undergraduate level, Hispanic students major in fields at rates generally proportionate to White students (see Figure 2). Hispanics tend to more often major in the social sciences and less often in the health sciences and education; however, they are equally likely to major in engineering, the life sciences, and business. With the exception of engineering, Hispanic women outnumber men. The single greatest issue facing Hispanic students is one of parity in representation within postsecondary education. The raw number of Hispanic students simply does not compare favorably to that for Whites. In 1995, for instance, Hispanic students received only 4.8 percent of the 1.12 million bachelors degrees awarded. Based in part on the undergraduate deficiency, Hispanics received only 3.7, 3.0, and 4.4 percent of the masters, doctoral, and professional degrees, respectively.

## Percent of Bachelor's Degrees: 1997



Based on data provided in Wilds, D. 2000. *Minorities in Higher Education: 1999-2000: 17th Annual Status Report*. Washington, DC.: American Council on Education.

**See also:** Access; Hispanic-Serving Institutions; Latino/Hispanic/Chicano Studies

### Further Reading:

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