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# **Serving Many in Many Ways:**

**Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Drivers of  
Opportunity and Socioeconomic Mobility**

## **SERVING MANY IN MANY WAYS:**

### **Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Drivers of Opportunity and Socioeconomic Mobility**

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## **TAKEAWAYS**

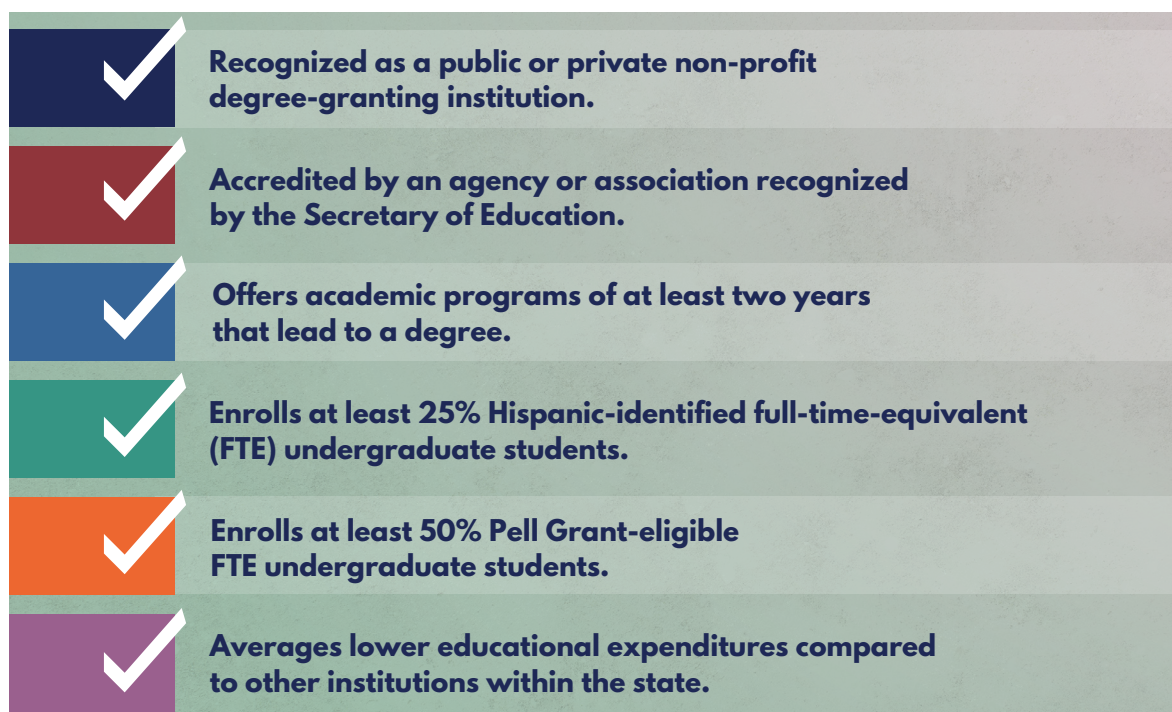
- **Far and above most other colleges and universities, HSIs do more with less, fulfilling higher education's mission of access and completion for historically underserved communities.**
- **HSIs serve students, especially Latino students, holistically—offering them culturally validating and enriching experiences inside and outside of the classroom and priming them for success through college and civic life.**
- **Recognized by the HSI STEM Hub and other initiatives by the National Science Foundation, HSIs strengthen and diversify STEM fields and the rapidly growing STEM workforce.**

Growing nearly 10% in the last 30 years, the Hispanic or Latino community now represents a staggering one out of every five people in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This growth reflects the changing face and feel of the country, including our schools and higher education system, and it's given way to increasing numbers of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), a distinctive type of minority-serving institution (MSI). MSIs are postsecondary institutions recognized by the federal government for educating racially/ethnically minoritized students, including nearly 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and 32 Tribally-Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCUs). Forming most of the MSI community, though, are hundreds of colleges and universities *not* expressly founded to serve historically excluded or marginalized students like HBCUs and TCCUs but that educate thousands of students of color: Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, Alaskan Native-Serving Institutions, Native American-Serving Non-Tribal Institutions, Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs)—and Hispanic-Serving Institutions.<sup>2</sup>

HSIs play an unparalleled role in the higher education of Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds. HSI status is a federal designation based on enrollment—requiring that at least a quarter of an institution’s undergraduates identify as Latino and half of all undergraduates qualify for Pell Grants. Although largely defined by these enrollment metrics, HSIs generally must also have below-average educational expenses. Despite these funding disparities, HSIs represent an important access and affordability point into higher education for long underserved communities.<sup>3</sup>

Institutions must apply for HSI designation annually since their enrollment demographics can shift from year to year, resulting in some institutions losing or gaining this status. Institutions on the cusp of HSI designation with a Latino undergraduate enrollment rate between 15% and 24% are known as emerging HSIs, or eHSIs.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Federal Criteria for HSI Designation**



*Source: Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965)*

Currently, 571 institutions—more than one in every six colleges and universities in the United States—qualify for HSI status. With generally affordable price tags and an overall commitment to access, HSIs are sites of opportunity, collectively educating over 60% of all Latino undergraduate students in the country.<sup>5</sup> In setting up historically underserved students for better life chances and higher paychecks, HSIs play an instrumental role in fulfilling the promise of higher education as a public good and helping restore the public’s trust in higher education.<sup>6</sup>

This report presents the origin story of HSIs and their distinctive features, showcasing their integral place within the higher education ecosystem. By contextualizing this distinctive group of MSIs and their contribution to higher education and Latino uplift, this report will help policymakers better understand and support these promising institutions and the many communities they serve.

## What's the Story of HSIs?

Marked by the Civil Rights Movement, El Movimiento, and the American Indian Movement, 1960s and 1970s America invokes images of radical social, cultural, and political change-making. Amid calls for societal transformation, President Lyndon B. Johnson led efforts to help equalize opportunity, including educational opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Key to this agenda was the landmark passage of the *Higher Education Act* of 1965 (HEA). Through the HEA, Congress recognized the unequal public investment in particular colleges and universities (ones now considered MSIs) and extended federal support for these institutions through Title III funding.

Originally, Congress mostly targeted Title III aid to HBCUs, spurring Latino advocacy groups like the Hispanic Higher Education Coalition and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) into action.<sup>8</sup> These leaders urged Congress to address Latino students' pressing needs by formally acknowledging and directing resources to institutions disproportionately serving these students.<sup>9</sup> After decades of advocacy, Congress officially recognized HSIs in 1992, simultaneously granting them access to Title III funds.<sup>10</sup> Yet as the ink dried, HBCU and HSI leaders voiced concern that this pie would be sliced too thin, ultimately rousing Congress to enact Title V—a capacity-building grant program for HSIs—in 1998.<sup>11</sup>

What was so novel about HSIs' legal and political recognition? With very few exceptions, HSIs were not deliberately founded to serve Latino students like HBCUs and TCCUs, which were built to serve Black or African American and Indigenous students, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Rather, colleges and universities hitting the set enrollment thresholds *became* HSIs. In this way, the formal federal recognition of HSIs birthed a new kind of MSI—one based on enrollment and, thus, responsive to demographic changes. Following this precedent and concerted advocacy efforts, Congress later recognized and invested in other enrollment-based MSIs, including AANAPISIs and PBIs.<sup>13</sup>

Further setting HSIs apart from other MSIs, most Latino college students attend an HSI for their undergraduate studies.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, most Black or African American collegians do not go to HBCUs, and most Asian and Pacific Islander students do not attend AANAPISIs.<sup>15</sup> With HBCUs and TCCUs' historical foundations, their numbers are largely static and susceptible to decline. Meanwhile, the number of HSIs, like other enrollment-based MSIs, is a moving target—generally trending upward as the Latino community grows. These differences point to HSIs' mounting role within the higher education ecosystem, given the sheer size and projected growth of the Latino community. As major players among MSIs and within the broader higher education landscape, HSIs demand close attention.

*Federal recognition of HSIs birthed a new kind of MSI—one based on enrollment and, thus, responsive to demographic changes.*



## HSI Spotlight: Dominican University

[Dominican University](#) (DU) is a broad-access, private, four-year Catholic university in the outskirts of Chicago that enrolls 3,200 students, including 2,100 undergraduate students, 66% of whom identify as Hispanic/Latino. DU employs about 720 people and 140 full-time instructional staff members, boasting an impressive 10:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Academically, DU offers 50 undergraduate degrees and 25 graduate programs. DU has obtained several federal HSI grants since becoming an HSI in 2011. The university actively publicizes itself as Chicago's premier Catholic HSI and leader among HSIs, advancing opportunity and ensuring the social mobility of Latino students.

## Where Are HSIs and Who Attends Them?

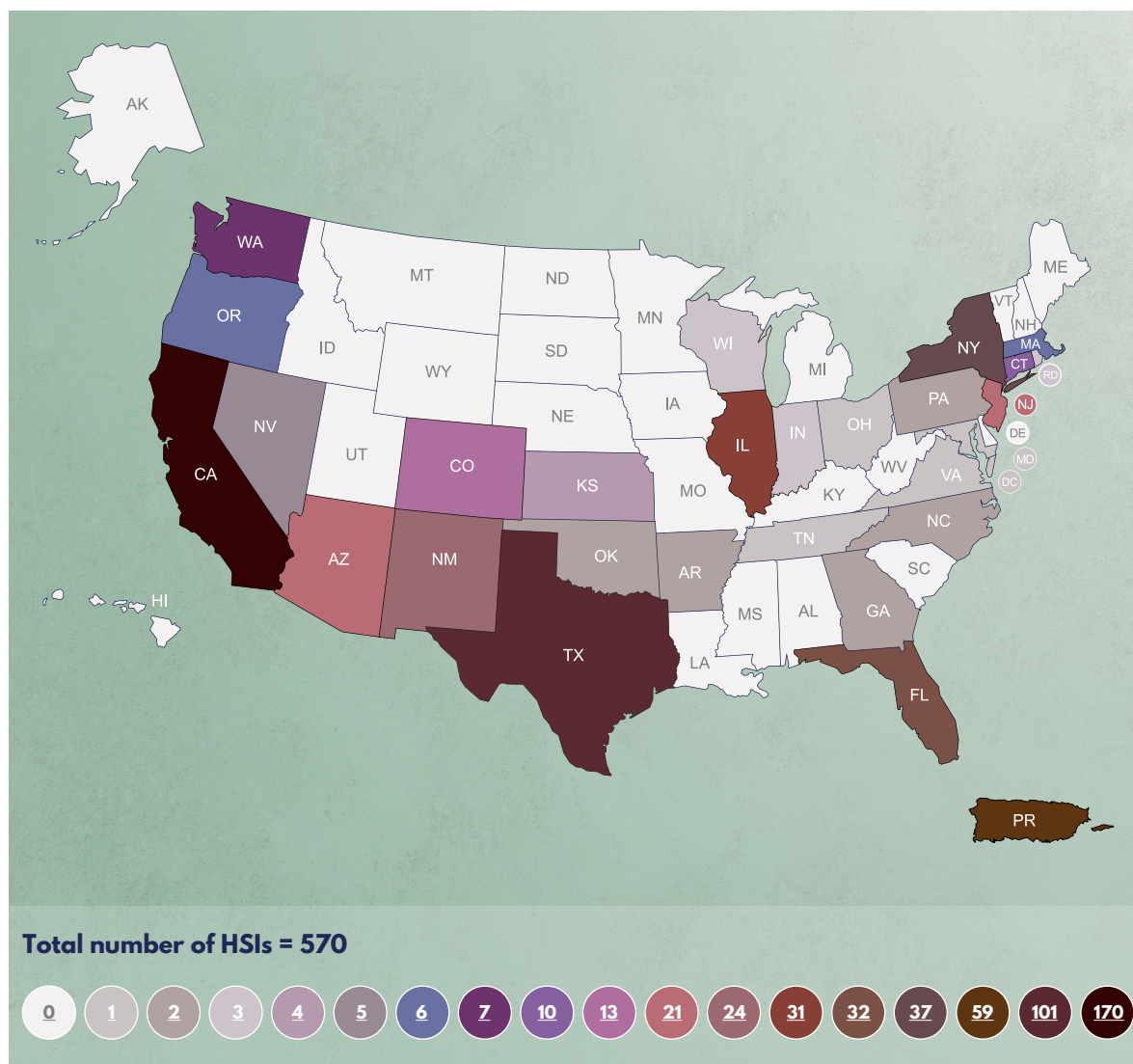
As enrollment-based institutions, HSIs make for an eclectic bunch.<sup>16</sup> About 40% are public community colleges, and 60% are four-year colleges and universities, almost evenly split between public and private institutions, including a growing number of research powerhouses like the University of Texas at Austin and Florida International University.<sup>17</sup>

The enrollment requirements for HSI status mean these institutions surface in areas with established or emerging Latino enclaves.<sup>18</sup> Given Latinos' historical migratory and settlement patterns, HSIs are geographically concentrated along the western coastline, the US-Mexico border, and in Puerto Rico.<sup>19</sup> As of 2021–2022, 70% of HSIs span just four states in addition to Puerto Rico. California is home to 170 HSIs, Texas has 101, Puerto Rico has 59, New York has 37, and Florida has 32. But with ongoing racial/ethnic demographic shifts, HSIs also exist in regions and states not traditionally known for large, vibrant Latino communities. Recent data show HSIs popping up in predominantly white areas. For instance, Central Community College in Nebraska, Marymount University in Virginia, and Southern Adventist University in Tennessee enroll the necessary share of Latino students for HSI designation.<sup>20</sup>

## HSI Spotlight: University of Central Florida

[The University of Central Florida](#) (UCF) is a selective, public, research-intensive university in Orlando that enrolls 68,000 students, including 59,000 undergraduate students, 29% of whom identify as Hispanic/Latino. It employs nearly 6,000 people and 1,500 full-time instructional staff members, yielding a 30:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Academically, UCF offers over 240 degree programs across 13 colleges, including a medical school. UCF receives extensive grant funding for faculty research and recently also obtained two federal grants, totaling \$5.9 million from the Department of Education in recognition of its Hispanic initiatives. UCF is one of 21 Hispanic-serving research institutions and an inaugural member of the Alliance of Hispanic Serving Research Universities.

**Figure 2. Location of HSIs, 2021–2022**



*Source:* Excelencia in Education’s 2021–2022 HSI list and author’s analysis of 2021–2022 IPEDS data.

*Note:* Numbers are subject to change annually.

All HSIs enroll at least 25% Latino and 50% Pell Grant–eligible students, respectively, with 45% of undergraduate students at HSIs identifying as Latino on average. Yet some HSIs skirt the line, barely hitting the required 25%, while others, notably the 59 HSIs in Puerto Rico, boast nearly 100% Latino enrollment.<sup>21</sup> And whereas some HSIs enroll the baseline 50% of Pell Grant recipients, others serve larger shares of students from low–income backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> Case in point: an average of 79% of degree– or certificate–seeking undergraduate students at HSIs in Puerto Rico receive Pell Grants based on the most recent federal data.

**Table 1: HSIs' Racial/Ethnic Student Demographics by Sector, 2021–2022**

Racial/Ethnic Group FTE Undergraduate	Public 4-Year+	Private 4-Year+	Public 2-Year	Private 2-Year	All HSIs
American Indian/ Alaska Native	0.6%	0.4%	0.9%	0.1%	0.7%
Asian	7.8%	4.1%	6.3%	5.1%	6.1%
Black/African American	7.9%	9.8%	7.6%	16.5%	8.4%
Hispanic/Latino	46.7%	48.4%	41.8%	43.5%	45.2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.6%	0.3%
Two or More Races	3.1%	2.3%	3.2%	2.6%	2.9%
White	25.5%	20.1%	25.4%	15.4%	23.8%
Unknown	2.4%	2.9%	2.6%	4.6%	2.7%
Non-US Resident	2.5%	3.7%	1.4%	0.1%	2.4%
Total number of HSIs	164	160	223	4	551

*Source:* Racial/ethnic group percentages per FTE were calculated by the author following Excelencia in Education's methodology, which relies on the National Center for Education Statistics' suggested sector-specific multipliers used to create FTE from part-time undergraduate enrollment.<sup>23</sup>

*Note:* These numbers are based on Excelencia in Education's 2021–2022 HSI list and 2021–2022 IPEDS data and are subject to change annually.

Notably, the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of HSIs' student bodies means some of these institutions also meet the criteria for other MSI designations. For instance, multiple HSIs—particularly within the California State University system—enroll many Asian and Pacific Islander students, resulting in dual classification as an AANAPISI *and* an HSI.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, St. Phillips College, a public HBCU in San Antonio, Texas, became an HSI in the last decade.<sup>24</sup> Various HSIs are also “minority institutions”—places in which more than half of the institution's undergraduate students are from a racially/ethnically minoritized background.

Ultimately, enrollment varies widely at HSIs. About a quarter (26%) of HSIs enroll less than 1,000 students, 27% enroll between 1,001–3,000 students, and 15% enroll between 3,001–5,000 students.<sup>25</sup> This means that approximately two-thirds (68%) of HSIs are relatively small enterprises, but some are massive operations. Miami Dade College in Florida, for example, operates eight campuses and enrolls over 50,000 undergraduate students, making it one of the largest postsecondary institutions in the country.

## HSI Spotlight: CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice

[CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#) (JJC) is a selective, public, bachelor's- and master's degree-awarding urban college in New York City that enrolls 14,000 students, including 12,000 undergraduate students, 50% of whom identify as Hispanic/Latino. It employs about 2,200 people and 400 full-time instructional staff, yielding an 18:1 student-to-faculty ratio. JJC also ranks among the top quartile nationally in terms of its economic mobility, with 85% of students graduating debt free. Academically, JJC offers 31 undergraduate majors and eight graduate degrees. JJC has obtained multiple Title V grants from the Department of Education. Despite its success in this arena and high Latino enrollment, JJC's website says little about its HSI status.

## What Resources Are HSIs Working With?

HSIs are a highly diverse set of institutions, but they are also generally cash-strapped and receive less federal and state funding than non-HSIs—bringing in only about 68 cents for every federal dollar non-HSIs receive.<sup>26</sup> This contributes to challenges like those faced by Hostos Community College in the South Bronx of New York City, which has been on the brink of shuttering its doors several times over its 50-year history, only bucking closure thanks to grassroots organizers.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Bloomfield College, a private four-year HSI in New Jersey, merged with nearby Montclair State University in 2023 to stay afloat.<sup>28</sup> In short, HSIs often have severe resource gaps, with many in need of dire infrastructure maintenance and facility and technological upgrades, among others.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 2: HSIs' Average Resource Conditions, 2021–2022**

	Public 4-Year+	Private 4-Year+	Public 2-Year	Private 2-Year	All HSIs
<b>Average Total Expenses per FTE Undergraduate</b>	<b>\$29,209</b>	<b>\$20,207</b>	<b>\$19,603</b>	<b>\$30,678</b>	<b>\$22,729</b>
<b>Average Total Revenues per FTE Undergraduate</b>	<b>\$31,947</b>	<b>\$26,445</b>	<b>\$21,575</b>	<b>\$24,190</b>	<b>\$26,069</b>
<b>Average Endowment (in Millions)</b>	<b>\$173</b>	<b>\$7.71</b>	<b>\$1.28</b>	<b>\$4.45</b>	<b>\$90.30</b>
<b>Average Endowment per FTE Undergraduate</b>	<b>\$12,237</b>	<b>\$29,372</b>	<b>\$10,895</b>	<b>\$4,731</b>	<b>\$17,201</b>
<b>Average Number of Total Employees</b>	<b>2,184</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>753</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1,061</b>
<b>Student-Faculty Ratio</b>	<b>18:1</b>	<b>14:1</b>	<b>19:1</b>	<b>12:1</b>	<b>17:1</b>

*Source:* These numbers are based on *Excellencia in Education*'s 2021–2022 HSI list and author's analysis of 2021–2022 IPEDS data.

*Notes:* Numbers are subject to change annually. Institutions do not report all the same information, especially regarding endowment assets, to the federal government, meaning these averages are based on varying total numbers of institutions—a range, in this case, from 398 to 570. Average endowment reflects the total value of an institution's endowment at the end of 2021. The average endowment values for all HSIs and public 4-year HSIs include the University of Texas System, whose large endowment inflates these means.



HSIs excel at doing more with less, providing students with great financial need with the social and economic benefits of higher education. Among the top 20% of institutions regarding economic mobility, over a third are HSIs based on the most recent College Scorecard data. Institutions in the California State University and the City University of New York systems are ahead of the pack, offering solid returns on investment with their relatively affordable tuition compared to students' post-graduate salaries. The upshot: HSIs enroll a sizeable share of students from low-income backgrounds and set them up for economic security.<sup>30</sup>

Attending an HSI pays off quickly, too. Third Way's Price-to-Earnings Premium (PEP) metric represents the average time it takes a student to recoup their investment to attend a given college. Among all colleges within the PEP data where students recoup their costs in less than a year, 48% are HSIs. For all HSIs in the PEP, 77% provide students with the return on investment to recoup their tuition costs within five years.<sup>31</sup>

These metrics underscore that HSIs are models of a “bang-for-your-buck” education—exemplars for other institutions to mirror, particularly given how growing concern about college affordability and rising debt burdens continues to erode public confidence in higher education.<sup>32</sup> HSIs' collective commitment to low-income students, many of whom are from racially/ethnically minoritized backgrounds, uplifts individual students and their families and helps abate racially patterned inequality in this country.<sup>33</sup>

### HSI Spotlight: Imperial Valley College

[Imperial Valley College](#) (IVC) is an open-access, rural, public two-year college in California close to the Mexico border that enrolls 7,700 undergraduate students—the overwhelming majority of whom (92%) identify as Hispanic/Latino. IVC employs about 465 people and 150 full-time instructional staff members, yielding a 32:1 student-to-faculty ratio. Academically, it offers 24 degrees eligible for transfer to a four-year institution and nearly 50 additional degree and certificate programs. Despite enrolling mostly Latino students, IVC's website says little about its HSI status.

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## Hispanic-Serving Institutions' Points of Pride

### *HSIs are Gateways to College and College Degrees*

HSIs contribute to the public good by educating and graduating students, particularly those from historically underserved communities. In addition to their substantial Latino student bodies, HSIs enrolled approximately 285,000 Black/African American students, 311,000 Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 15,000 American Indian/Alaskan Native students in 2018–2019.<sup>34</sup>

HSIs also open their doors to many other marginalized populations for whom a college degree is often out of reach, including first-generation college-goers, English language learners, parenting students, immigrants, and transfer students.<sup>35</sup> HSIs shoulder a great deal of work in providing additional supports for these student populations.<sup>36</sup> Yet getting students into college is only part of the equation. Getting them through and out matters, too, and HSIs hit the mark here as well, graduating scores of students each year and positioning them for better futures.

In terms of graduating Latino students, HSIs boast comparable completion rates to predominantly white institutions despite their resource limitations. Furthermore, when accounting for MSIs' mixed enrollment of part- and full-time students, HSIs have much higher overall completion rates than federal graduation rates suggest. Based on 2007 cohort National Student Clearinghouse data, public Hispanic-serving community colleges graduated 40% of full-time students in four years, while the federal graduation rate hovered around 26%. Public four-year HSIs graduated approximately half of all students in six years (part-time and full-time students) and nearly 75% when considering full-time students exclusively, though the federal graduation rate put this number closer to 43%.<sup>37</sup>

### *HSIs Serve Students Holistically*

HSIs serve students well by providing a holistic collegiate experience. While there is no singular student experience across HSIs, Latino students have also praised these institutions for recognizing their culture and providing a validating experience.<sup>38</sup> HSIs cultivate Latino students' academic self-concept and the salience of their racial/ethnic identity often more than other colleges and universities while also promoting students' civic engagement, social agency, and leadership skills.<sup>39</sup>

HSIs also offer students enriching academic experiences, including undergraduate research opportunities and peer mentoring programs that have been effective in supporting students' academic success.<sup>40</sup> Many HSIs have redesigned their curricula to embrace this designation, more fully honoring Latino students' cultural heritage.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, many HSIs have worked to diversify their faculty to better reflect their students—a move in the right direction given the limited racial/ethnic representation among US faculty, including faculty at HSIs.<sup>42</sup> Just this year, the University of California, Los Angeles announced the hiring of a cluster of faculty committed to uplifting Latino and first-generation students as part of its HSI infrastructural initiative.<sup>43</sup>

### *HSIs Open Doors to STEM Fields and Careers*

HSIs open doors to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and careers—spaces historically unwelcoming to women and people of color.<sup>44</sup> For instance, recognizing HSIs' role in developing STEM pathways, the Computing Alliance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions—a network of about 60 HSIs across the country and Puerto Rico—has worked diligently to address the underrepresentation of Latinos in computing fields and careers for almost 20 years.<sup>45</sup>

Hispanic-serving community colleges especially provide STEM pathways to students of color.<sup>46</sup> A significant number of Latino community college STEM students (81%) attend an HSI or eHSI, and four-year HSIs/eHSIs educate nearly 60% of Latino STEM students.<sup>47</sup> HSIs also open STEM pathways for students from low-income backgrounds, with 37% and 44% of STEM students at two-year and four-year HSIs, respectively, falling within the lowest income quartile.<sup>48</sup>

More than just opening these doors, HSIs *graduate* STEM students—nearly 40% of Latino STEM-degree holders graduated from an HSI in 2010. They also support Latino STEM students in their studies and post-graduate careers. Multiple HSIs have launched STEM faculty mentoring and advising programs, among other targeted strategies for STEM persistence, often with federal grant support.<sup>49</sup> The Biden-Harris Administration also committed \$40 million to support HSIs' efforts in this area, recognizing their keen role in developing STEM pathways.

## Policy Recommendations to Support HSIs

HSIs get students into college programs, get them through, and set them on a path to be better off than when they started. Through their many contributions, HSIs are drivers of opportunity and economic mobility, holding the promise of higher education's equalizing ideals and the possibility of restoring public trust in higher education.

Policymakers and federal agencies that manage HSI grant programs, such as the Department of Education, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Science Foundation, have several opportunities to strengthen support for HSIs and amplify the work these institutions do to serve students and their communities and the public good:

- 1. Increase funding to federal HSI grant programs,** such as the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program and the Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans Program under Title V and the HSI STEM Articulation Program under Title III. The growth in the number of HSIs has generally outpaced the modest increases in Congressional appropriations for these programs. Although 462 HSIs were eligible for Title V Developing HSI funding in 2021, less than half received funding.<sup>50</sup> Considering the benefits and transformative potential of these grants, it is imperative to further invest in these programs.
- 2. Monitor the growth of and diversity among HSIs and applicants of federal HSI grants.** Pay special attention to institutional and resource differences among these colleges as well as their efforts to serve Latino students and students from low-income backgrounds, among other underserved communities. Applying for federal grants requires significant staff time and resources, which puts institutions with capacity constraints at a disadvantage in competing for and securing needed federal grants.<sup>51</sup> Better understanding which schools apply for and obtain federal funding simultaneously reveals which institutions are *under*-benefiting from these programs. Targeted supports through mentorship or application assistance would assist those institutions newer to the federal grant process or who face major barriers to applying.<sup>52</sup>
- 3. Revisit the criteria for the evaluation, selection, and renewal of federal HSI grant programs.** Federal HSI programs often do not distinguish applicants by their institutional characteristics, student demographics, or commitment to serving Latino students or students from low-income backgrounds beyond enrollment.<sup>53</sup> To realize the promise of these grants and safeguard this investment, these elements should be more formally factored into the priorities for selection for these programs. In doing so, policymakers should collaborate with and solicit public feedback from HSI leaders and scholars to ensure mission alignment and successful implementation.<sup>54</sup>



## Endnotes

For select case studies: The description of the select-ed cases is based on 2021–2022 IPEDS data, publicly available data from the HSI Division on Title V awardees, and information from institutions’ websites as of 2024.

1. People use various identifiers to describe the pan-ethnic and racially diverse group of people “linked to U.S. history through immigration, acquisition of lands, or political upheavals” including “Hispanic” and gender-inclusive terms like “Latinx” and “Latine.” This report uses the term “Latino” to denote persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American culture or origin, regardless of race.

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