



How to Increase Postsecondary Enrollment of Hispanic Graduates: Recommendations From College and Career Advisors

Purpose of Report and Role of College and Career Advisors

The purpose of this report is to provide recommendations for what the district can do to increase postsecondary enrollment by Hispanic graduates, based on Austin Independent School District (AISD) studies.¹ Although the percentage of AISD graduates who enroll in postsecondary education has increased over the past decade regardless of race or ethnicity, *Hispanic graduates had the lowest postsecondary enrollment rate of any student ethnic/racial group each year.* To eliminate the consistent enrollment gap of Hispanic graduates, the district must implement new strategies.

In spring 2015, 14 college and career advisors in AISD participated in an interview about what the district can do to increase Hispanic graduates' postsecondary enrollment. The experience and expertise of college and career advisors make them an invaluable source for ideas on this issue. The recommendations that follow result from combining and condensing the ideas and stories conveyed by these 14 individuals.

Recommendations

1. Create a college-going culture from prekindergarten on.

An early introduction to college will increase postsecondary enrollment rates. AISD students who start thinking about college as an option before they enter high school are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than are students who consider college after they enter high school.² The 2015 senior survey indicated 39% of AISD Hispanic seniors did not consider college as an option until they were in high school.³

Creating a college-going culture starting from the child's first experience with school could make college the ultimate educational goal for Hispanic families. In a college-going culture, the understanding among students, parents, and all school staff is that education does not end with high school graduation. Almost half of Hispanic seniors have a parent who did not complete high school, compared with only 9% of non-Hispanic seniors who do so.⁴ So for many Hispanic families, high school graduation is the education end-goal, not college.

"Our families, they have it tough. But at the same time, we just continually stay in this perpetual cycle if we don't find a way to break out ... I think it's an issue of our children not being educated early enough about their opportunities."

1. Pazera. (2012). *Focus on Hispanic seniors: 2011 High School Exit Survey and Postsecondary Enrollment.*
2. Wiggins. (2015). *Postsecondary Enrollment for 2013 Graduates: Austin Independent School District*
3. Wiggins. (2015). *Class of 2015 High School Exit Survey.*
4. Pazera. (2012).



A college-going culture could include the following elements:⁵

Implementing a career awareness and exploration curriculum every school year, beginning in prekindergarten, to allow children to expand their career horizons beyond what is familiar in their environment and get excited about taking the steps necessary to fulfill their career dreams

Introducing postsecondary options (e.g., university, community college, trade school, and apprenticeships) as part of a career awareness and exploration curriculum

Integrating college concepts (e.g., majors, degrees, and financial aid) into the core curriculum with increasing complexity from elementary through high school

Providing direct exposure to colleges and careers, beginning in elementary school (e.g., through college and industry visits, guest speakers, and career days)

Holding one or two college-related events at every campus at the elementary and secondary levels simultaneously so the district and local media can publicize and promote the events throughout Austin (e.g., district-wide College 101 and workshops on how to afford college, tailored to the school level).

“If we could have that start in elementary school, we’re not working in triage all the time.”

2. Inform and educate parents of elementary and middle school students about the possibility of their child going to college and the process for enrolling.

The role of educating Hispanic families about the possibility of college falls mainly on the schools because only 26% of Hispanic seniors have a parent who attained a postsecondary degree, compared with 68% of non-Hispanic seniors.⁶ Introducing the possibility of college to the parents of elementary and middle school students could dispense with myths and fears about college at a time when parents might be more open to the future possibility of their child enrolling. Addressing these parents’ questions about college (e.g., Can my child enroll if she is not a citizen? Who will feed my son in college? Do I have to go into debt? How do I save for college? Will my daughter be safe?) could turn skeptical parents into advocates for their child’s college education, and help them set students on the college path.

All parents could benefit from college preparatory activities early in the child’s educational trajectory. Taking parents on college tours with their elementary or middle school children, sponsoring talks about budgeting and saving for college from kindergarten on, having representatives of local colleges talk with parents at elementary and middle schools, and explaining the benefits of dual credit and other ways students and families can reduce future college costs are all activities that could demonstrate to parents that college may be a real possibility for their child.

Hosting college events on a regular basis could encourage parents to anticipate events and talk to people who attended prior ones. Such events should give parents an opportunity to talk with a knowledgeable person, in their own language; *be scheduled on weekends or after regular work hours*; and provide child care and snacks. To implement this initiative, college readiness support teams could be formed at every elementary and secondary campus and include staff such as a vice principal, teacher, counselor, and parent support specialist.

“If we could give families a flow chart of, like, this is what you need to work on in the first grade: Have you set up a savings account? If you put \$100 in there every year from now until 12th grade, that’s \$1,200, takes care of books. Just something simple like that so that it’s tangible. It makes families feel like, yes, we can do this.”

5. See [supplemental report](#) for resources on how to implement these ideas.

6. Wiggins. (2015).

3. Increase staff capacity to serve more students and to reach the students most in need.

College and career advisors need additional support to reach more students, especially those most in need. Most college and career advisors felt pressed to meet the needs of the students who actively sought their help. Rarely did they have time to reach out to students younger than juniors or seniors, or to students who had not already expressed an interest in college. Hispanic students sought help from college and career advisors at the same rate as did non-Hispanic students, even though a larger percentage were in need of assistance.⁷

“At smaller schools, like Ann Richards, they have more help, someone outside of [college and career advising] who does scholarships and alumni outreach.... I rely on big events and mass communication to reach students, and relationships are not built that way.... Decrease the ratio and get more hands on deck.”

Additional staff capacity would help close the equity gap between campuses. Equity in college and career support services does not exist among the district’s high schools. Ratios of students to college and career advisors varied widely by campus, based on campus enrollment and funding dedicated to college access efforts. Funding for college trips, scholarship assistance, staff professional development activities, meals for parent meetings, alumni outreach, and technology all differed widely between campuses.

At many campuses, insufficient staffing and too many responsibilities make relationship building with all students in need impossible. Trust, built through relationships, is the cornerstone for increasing the postsecondary enrollment rate of Hispanic graduates. Not only are Hispanic families being asked to complete a complex process, but some also are dealing with fears regarding their immigration status and loss of family income. Parents with personal concerns such as these rarely ask questions in large-group settings. It takes building trust to get Hispanic families to share their true concerns.

How can the district increase staff capacity given budget constraints?

Start small and develop a funding plan for expansion. An increase in the rate of postsecondary enrollment of Hispanic graduates could have wide-reaching community benefits. The district can apply for government and foundation grants specifically designed to increase postsecondary access. Even providing part-time support at campuses for specific activities, such as scholarship coordination, would be helpful to increase capacity and address the issue of equity.

Employ a qualified Spanish-speaking person to work with students and families districtwide. Responsibilities for this position could include meeting with Hispanic students, holding college events in small groups in Spanish, and taking calls in Spanish from any parent or student in the district about college-related issues (e.g., the Texas Application for State Financial Aid [TASFA] and college admissions).

“Making [parents] understand [the money part] takes more than a Financial Aid Saturday or a presentation. They need to sit down with you one-on-one with their paperwork so that they are comfortable enough to ask the real questions they have.”

Protect the time college and career counselors dedicate to talking to and meeting with students and families. This would mean not giving college and career counselors additional responsibilities, and possibly reducing the number of tasks they currently have, such as proctoring exams.

Request the assistance of interns from local colleges. The University of Texas at Austin, Texas State University, and St. Edwards University have graduate programs that instruct in how to prepare high school students for college. Internship opportunities may be welcomed.

7. Pazera. (2012)

Do not rely solely on nonprofit agencies to equalize students' and families' college counseling opportunities among campuses. These agencies do not serve every campus and may experience changes in funding and priorities from year to year. The quality of the assistance also varies, and the district cannot control that.

4. Involve the community in addressing the issue.

Recruit Hispanic parents of AISD alumni to volunteer to share with other Hispanic families their experience sending their child to college. A network of such parents could organize to talk with small groups of parents of elementary, middle, or high school students. A campus team, including a lead parent volunteer, could organize these activities.

Solicit funding for programmatic support and scholarships from businesses and organizations in the community.

College and career advisors identified cost as a major obstacle to Hispanic students' postsecondary enrollment. Additional local scholarships awarded on the basis of financial need have the potential to help many students. Collaboration with AISD's Office of Innovation and Development to solicit local funds for programmatic support and scholarships will be essential.

Conclusion

District leaders should consider incorporating these recommendations into a comprehensive plan to increase the postsecondary enrollment of Hispanic graduates. A district-wide plan covering prekindergarten to 12th grade, with dedicated resources, is more likely to produce tangible results than would efforts exclusively at secondary campuses. District activities and planning efforts as part of the regional Direct to College 70 initiative could become elements of a more extensive plan, tailored to meet district needs. Given the changes in the local and global economies, the future economic success of Hispanic families in Austin relies on securing a postsecondary education. The postsecondary enrollment gap of Hispanic graduates, which has been evident for more than a decade, will only be eliminated if the specific needs of Hispanic families are addressed.

References

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“In the culture that most of our Hispanic students are raised, it’s very family-oriented, and going off to college and worrying about *your* education and worrying about *your* future is seen as almost slightly negative.... But what I try to stress to students is... that they are in charge of their family’s legacy. And they’re in charge of being able to change the track on which their family is going.”

