

Foreword

SYLVIA HURTADO

University of California, Los Angeles

More than two decades ago, scholars began to sound an alarm signaling that advancing Latinas/os in higher education was critical to U.S. national interests. They reasoned that the stability of our economy, health, social welfare, and political systems depended on educating a booming Latina/o population that would emerge to replace an aging, predominantly white population and workforce (de los Santos & Rigual, 1994; Gándara, 1986; Hayes-Bautista, Schink, & Chapa, 1990). There was no need to read the tea leaves or speculate about our shared destiny. Demographic projections based on immigration rates and the growth of a relatively young population provided clear estimates for the future. The forecast served as an impetus for scholarship on Latinas/os and educational practice. Revised estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) predict that 30 percent of U.S. residents will be Latina/o by 2050. The future is here, and responsive approaches to addressing Latina/o postsecondary education issues are critical to our collective success.

At issue is whether educators and policy makers are more willing to heed the urgency in research and take steps to improve postsecondary outcomes for Latina/o students. Latina/o enrollments have more than tripled at both two- and four-year institutions since 1976 and are projected to increase an additional 38 percent by 2018 at degree-granting institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, 2009). Yet equitable degree attainment rates remain elusive. For example, only 47 percent of Latinas/os entering four-year colleges complete a degree in six years, compared to 67 percent of non-Hispanic White students (Carey, 2004). Remarkably, however, few educators understand the unique issues that may affect Latina/o students during their years in college. For example, although parental education has risen across all groups, Latina/o students are more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be the first in their families to enter college (Hurtado, Sáenz, Santos, & Cabrera, 2008). This has been the case since the 1970s. As a result, stories about learning how to navigate one's way through college, living a bicultural existence, encountering hostile racial climates, and overcoming the odds to succeed are very familiar to Latina/o scholars who study students in college.

The student voices of today—including those collected in this special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*—echo our own experiences as Latinas/os attending college in earlier decades. Now that the numbers of Latina/o students have increased in higher education, perhaps these voices will be more thunderous and today's educators will be more willing to listen.

Perhaps educators and policy makers will devote more attention to research on Latinas/os today because there is increased emphasis on public accountability and a push for degree attainment in higher education. There are “carrots” and “sticks” for institutional performance, which may depend on research and implementation of new practices to improve degree attainment rates and college experiences of Latinas/os. For example, on the incentive side, many campuses (with student bodies that are at least 25 percent Latina/o) may qualify for designation as a Hispanic-serving institution. These institutions are eligible for federal support for programs based on institutional plans to improve student success. Additionally, two- and four-year “broad access” institutions—those that admit the majority of applicants—serve the majority of Latinas/os in college and have the greatest numbers of English-language learners, undocumented students, low-income students, and students returning to get a second chance at a college education. They face resource issues that highly selective institutions do not, and therefore any additional source of funding is important for these institutions and their students.

President Obama is aware of the link between the nation's destiny and the fate of young Latinas/os. His push for more college graduates to reinvigorate the workforce, referred to as the American Graduation Initiative, is backed by the promise of federal support targeted at broad access institutions (White House Blog, 2009). Several foundations have joined in the effort. For example, using both research and efforts to scale-up innovative practice, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's (2009) postsecondary initiative set the goal to double degree attainments by 2025. Institutions that are innovative and proactive in their approach to educating Latinas/os have the potential to gain visibility and financial support in this historical moment, and Latina/o students also stand to benefit from this new window of opportunity. But much will depend on the extent to which institutions follow “business as usual” or base their practice on a better understanding of Latina/o student experiences. We need fresh perspectives that examine the heterogeneity of Latina/o experiences across race/ethnicity, gender, and class dimensions in order to close the gap on student success and move the needle on retention that has remained firmly positioned below 50 percent. While recent developments are promising, the glass is not yet half full.

Latina/o students are entering higher education in greater numbers just as institutions are expected to do more with less. The accountability movement has grown to encompass scrutiny of higher education institutions and student outcomes. We need to know more about our students—where they begin and where they end in terms of their learning and development—as well as the

impact of effective practice. Greater public scrutiny of degree attainment rates by race/ethnicity across institutions is an important step in achieving equity. However, a big question is whether the accountability focus will actually result in improved outcomes for more Latina/o students. Attempts to draw comparisons between postsecondary institutions that recruit vastly different student populations can be misguided. Instead of improving the quality of education for their students, some institutions can simply select high-ability students and show changes in test scores and retention rates in four to five years without altering practices in teaching and learning. The institutions that do not have the ability to alter admissions will face greater scrutiny as they become the only options for educating the students who most need higher education. At the same time, such institutions face a significant decline in educational resources in most states.

But relying on incentives and accountability to spur research and reform may not be enough. The economic downturn of 2008 will be legendary and have profound long-term effects on higher education and its students. As states with growing Latina/o populations attempt to balance their own budgets over the short term, legislators tend to view higher education as the one area that can draw from other resources for support, including student fees/tuition, research overhead, and auxiliary enterprises. States have proposed reducing crucial programs, including postsecondary grants and scholarships, outreach to communities (at a time when families need more information on how to finance college), and specific initiatives to help the most vulnerable students stay in college (Blumenstyk, 2009). Researchers today have to re-sound the alarm and provide important evidence to shape policies that will not only advance Latina/o populations but also help fuel state economies. Economists have already estimated that states stand to gain billions of dollars in revenues by equalizing baccalaureate attainments for African Americans and Latinas/os (Carnevale & Fry, 2000). This is an important time for research on improving transfer rates and student time to degree, Latina/o student and family responses to institutional tuition/fee hikes, and the value of educating undocumented students. Studies are necessary to increase state commitment and help both educators and policy makers to see the long-term benefits of investment in higher education.

The emergence of a significant Latina/o middle class that still maintains one foot in working-class origins may signal a more ready audience for research on Latinas/os. There are more visible Latina/o leaders at the state and federal levels, community leaders, teachers, scholars engaged in action research, and others who are in positions to put research on Latinas/os into action. Clearly, there are still not enough of us in decision-making positions, but we have found roles in institutions and policy-making bodies that can benefit our communities based on an emerging Latina/o intellectual tradition. Moreover, there are many potential allies who daily face the increasing numbers of Latina/o students at their doorsteps. They are not only willing

to learn but also are often engaged in significant change efforts. More often than not, those engaged in practice or change efforts do not have the time to do research. Their work stands to benefit from research on Latina/o students, and they depend on researchers for concepts, frameworks, and information that can help guide their practice. We can only imagine an audience when we write for publication, but I have discovered that more people are reading and willing to learn about scholarship on Latinas/os because it affects their daily work. And in working directly with institutional agents, researchers can learn how practices evolve to address the challenges facing Latinas/os in college.

Armed with a renewed sense of urgency about closing the gaps in Latina/o achievement and attainment, we can take advantage of a window of opportunity to improve Latina/o student success in higher education based on good research and insightful practice. We can sound the alarm once again: Latinas/os are entering college in the midst of a perfect storm that may set them further back in terms of degree progress, which would have dire consequences for society. While there is much uncertainty about institutional responses to external pressures, it is clear that Latina/o student experiences at elite and broad-access institutions are distinct, and more research is needed to understand how students can be successful in all types of institutions. Now is the time to advance research, policy, and practice on behalf of Latinas/os in higher education and to present their compelling stories—both because the need is great and because we may have a more willing audience now than we have had in the past. This special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* is a significant step in that direction.

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