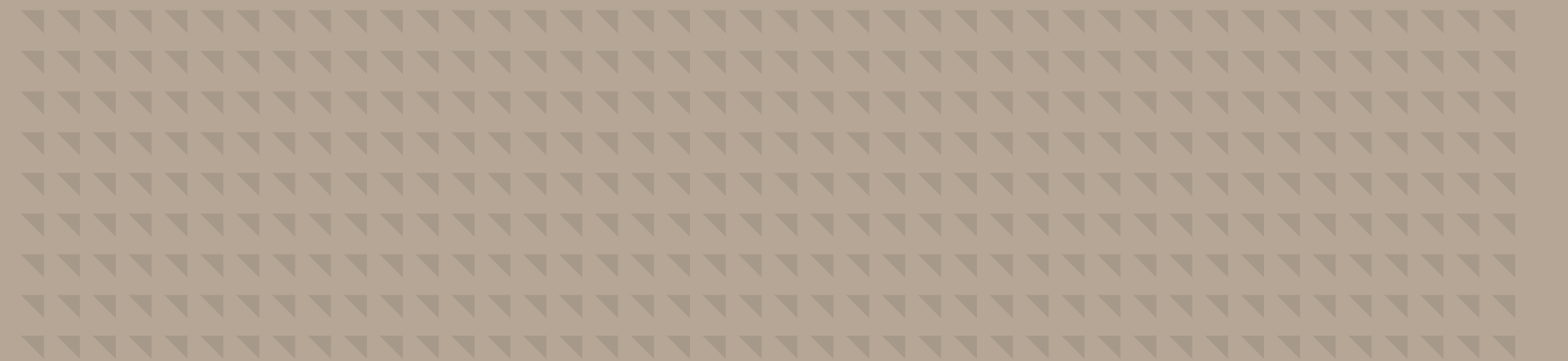


# Community College Faculty at Work



Facilitating the Success of  
First-Generation Hispanic Students





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## Executive Summary

### Overview

Research has shown that student engagement is related to persistence and success in postsecondary education. Little attention, however, has been placed on how faculty engage students in the classroom. Hispanic undergraduate enrollment in the United States has been concentrated in two-year institutions, and Hispanics who are the first in their families to attend college have typically enrolled in community colleges. Although the community college has contributed to expanding access, Hispanic community college students have historically had the lowest retention rates and highest transfer losses. To improve the postsecondary educational attainment of first-generation Hispanic students, attention must be placed on how community college faculty engage students in the classroom.

To better understand how community college faculty have engaged Hispanic students, we asked three institutions to nominate 15 faculty members who had been effective in facilitating the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students. We used the term “first generation” to refer to students who are the first in their immediate family to attend college. We followed the U.S. Census Bureau definition of Hispanic as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. From this group of nominees, 41 participated in an interview.

The community college faculty we interviewed stressed that they did not place an emphasis specifically on developing strategies to enhance engagement with students of any particular racial or ethnic group. Rather, they have placed attention on engaging all students. Through their efforts they have developed a set of strategies relevant to improving the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students.

### Findings

Community college faculty identified significant barriers that first-generation Hispanic students face in their efforts to pursue and be successful in postsecondary education. These barriers include personal attributes that hinder participation or contribute to attrition, a lack of understanding regarding the college-going process, and a lack of college readiness. The faculty we interviewed stressed that there were a number of attributes of the community college that facilitate the academic success of all students. The first of these is the community college emphasis on teaching and learning. Developmental courses to assist underprepared students and tutoring and other academic support programs to assist students who encounter difficulties in completing courses were also identified as attributes that facilitate success for all students. In terms of first-generation Hispanic students, the extension of the community college into the Hispanic community was cited as an important attribute to facilitate first-generation academic success.

Community college faculty stress the importance of developing strategies based on knowledge of the Hispanic cultural characteristics and values and an understanding that Hispanic students indicate a preference toward social learning. Based on the responses from the interviews, we have developed the following 10 recommendations to facilitate academic success:

- Develop personal relationships with students—learn something personal about each student and share something personal about yourself.
- Be flexible with time at the beginning and end of each class.
- Create a positive environment by creating a learning community within the class.
- Emphasize active learning strategies.
- Incorporate cooperative learning.
- Connect class materials to personal, work, or real-life experiences.
- Present material in a step-by-step or building block approach, connecting new learning to previous material.
- Establish and maintain high standards.
- Provide frequent formative feedback in a constructive and encouraging manner.
- Recognize the accomplishments of the class as a whole.

Community college faculty also incorporate strategies that faculty at four-year institutions have utilized to promote student engagement: course-related interactions, active and collaborative learning techniques, academic challenge, higher-order cognitive activities, and academic enrichment activities. Participants in this study, however, emphasized that, for first-generation Hispanic students, developing a personal relationship with a student was a precursor to engaging the student in the classroom.



# Community College Faculty at Work: Facilitating the Success of First-Generation Hispanic Students

by Brent D. Cejda and Richard E. Hoover

## Introduction

The community college has been described as the pipeline for Hispanics in higher education (Rendon & Nora, 1989; Laden, 1992, 2001). In fall 2004, 59% of Hispanic undergraduate enrollment in the United States was at two-year institutions (Cook & Cordova, 2007). Community colleges, however, have struggled to improve overall retention, degree or certificate completion, and transfer rates (Bailey, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2006), and Hispanic community college students have historically had the lowest retention rates and highest transfer losses (Harvey, 2002; Rendon & Garza, 1996).

Student-faculty engagement has been identified as the best predictor of Hispanic student persistence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The Quality Education for Minorities Network (1997) found that among the institutions graduating the greatest numbers of minority students in mathematics, engineering, and science, most were able to identify a number of faculty members who were engaged with minority students outside of class and beyond their regular office hours. Other studies have found that faculty-student interaction positively influenced Hispanic students' degree aspirations and academic success (Colorado State Advisory Committee, 1995) or played an important role in the decision to transfer to a four-year institution (Brawer, 1995; Britt & Hirt, 1999).

Ewell (1997) argued for additional research on institutional and faculty practices that promote student learning in order to improve student learning. From this call, a number of studies have focused on self-reported student engagement behaviors. This line of inquiry has drawn from previous models of student persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), principles of good practice (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Educational Commission of the States, 1995), and studies of predictors of student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stage & Hossler, 2000). From these efforts, two related initiatives have emerged. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was established in 1998 and focuses on four-year colleges and universities. Recognizing the unique mission and student populations of two-year institutions, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was launched in 2001. Each of these initiatives has also begun to measure faculty expectations for student engagement, NSSE conducted a faculty survey in 2003 and CCSSE launched a faculty survey in 2008. From the initial NSSE faculty survey, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that the educational contexts that faculty created resulted in a positive effect on student learning and engagement. These authors proposed five classroom practices that promote student success. These practices are briefly described in the following paragraph.

The first practice involves course-related interactions. These interactions involve faculty and student interactions in the classroom on issues related to the course. A positive relationship was also found between student learning and active and collaborative learning techniques. Involving students in their learning has contributed to their success in the classroom. The third practice,

*A positive relationship was also found between student learning and active and collaborative learning techniques.*

academic challenge, means more than simply requiring a significant amount of homework. Rather, the term refers to establishing standards for achievement that are, in part, consistent with prior academic preparation, but also provide a gentle push for students to achieve more than they think they can accomplish. Emphasizing higher-order cognitive activities also contributes to student success. Examples of higher-order activities include the use of course content, the application of theories or concepts, or a synthesis of materials from different courses to address issues directly related to their interests and lives. The fifth practice, enriching educational activities, includes cocurricular involvement such as community service or service learning as well as practica, internships, and other culminating experiences.

As mentioned above, NSSE focuses on four-year institutions. Thus, a gap exists in the existing knowledge concerning the educational context established by community college faculty. The initial NSSE faculty study is further limited as it identifies what faculty do, but not how they do it. Moreover, we were not able to find any research that focuses specifically on faculty creating an educational context that promotes the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students. We use the term "first generation" to refer to students who are the first in their immediate families to attend college. We follow the U.S. Census Bureau definition of Hispanic as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

## **Methodology**

This study was developed around four guiding questions:

1. How do community college faculty characterize first-generation Hispanic students?
2. What attributes of the community college contribute to efforts to facilitate the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students?
3. What strategies do community college faculty use to facilitate the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students?
4. Do community college faculty use the same strategies as four-year faculty to create classroom environments that promote student engagement?



We incorporated a multiple case study design to examine how community college faculty members created an educational context that facilitated the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students. Creswell (2008) indicated that although qualitative researchers usually are reluctant to generalize their results to other cases, multiple cases do allow for the researchers to make modest claims of generalizable results when they “. . . identify findings that are common to all cases using cross-case analysis” (p. 490). To gain a broader perspective, we sought participating institutions on the basis of the three primary categories of community colleges; rural, suburban, and urban. In addition, the participating institutions have differing levels of Hispanic enrollments. These institutions are profiled below.

### **Rural Community College**

Rural Community College (RCC) is a multi-campus community college serving 25 counties—an area of approximately 14,000 square miles with a population of more than 300,000. RCC has three full-service campuses, three limited-service educational centers and also incorporates a variety of distance learning techniques to provide credit and non-credit educational opportunities throughout its service area. In the last decade, the Hispanic population in the RCC region has more than doubled. In fall 2008, the kindergarten class in the public school system of the largest city with a full-service campus was almost 50% Hispanic. RCC is also beginning to see increased Hispanic enrollment. In the fall of 2006, seven percent of the credit student population identified themselves as Hispanic representing a 100% increase over the past five years.

RCC offers 33 career and technical education programs requiring two years or less to complete. In 2005-06, RCC awarded 1,516 degrees, diplomas, and certificates in these career and technical programs. RCC also offers an academic transfer program, granting slightly more than 100 transfer degrees in 2005-06. In 2005-06, a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 13,500 students enrolled in credit courses, resulting in an full-time enrollment (FTE) (based on 30 semester hours) of slightly more than 3,750.

### **Suburban Community College**

Suburban Community College (SCC) is one of five comprehensive community colleges in a community college district that serves 1,400 square miles in two suburban counties of a major metropolitan service area. The main campus of SCC is in an unincorporated suburban area, the college has two additional educational centers and also provides online and hybrid distance education offerings. The vast majority of students at SCC are from a county that, between 2000 and 2005, experienced an 11% increase in the Hispanic population. SCC is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). In the fall of 2006, 31% of the student population at SCC was Hispanic, slightly less than the 37.5% Hispanic population in the primary county the institution serves.

SCC offers 23 career and technical education programs leading to 26 AAS degrees and 79 certificates and a university transfer program. In 2005-06, SCC awarded 610 associate degrees and 444 certificates. Based on a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 10,000, the FTE (based on 30 semester hours) in 2006-07 was slightly less than 4,900. The majority (60%) of SCC students are traditional aged (18-24) and more than two-thirds (68%) attend classes during the day.

### Urban Community College

Urban Community College (UCC) is located in the 14th largest Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in the United States, the fastest growing MSA in its state. UCC has a main campus, three education centers, and also offers courses via the Internet. Between 1990 and 2004, the Hispanic population of the MSA has increased by approximately 80%. UCC is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Currently the student population at UCC is 42% Hispanic, which is representative of the Hispanic population in the MSA.

The overwhelming majority (90%) of UCC students enter the institution with the intent to transfer to a baccalaureate institution. Transcripts reveal, however, that almost 60% of the degree recipients have completed some vocational courses. In 2006-07, UCC awarded 1,371 degrees and 643 certificates. Based on a non-duplicated headcount of slightly more than 19,850, the FTE (based on 30 semester hours) in 2006-2007 was slightly more than 14,000. As the locations on the campus and centers are in close proximity to each other, students often attend multiple locations of UCC. Among the 2006-07 student population, 87.8% enrolled on the main campus, 29.3% enrolled at one of the three centers, and 12.5% completed courses via the Internet.

To assist in the logistical aspects of the study, we established a relationship with an institutional contact, an instructional administrator, at each of the three community colleges. We described the research project to the institutional contact, assuring the anonymity of the college and the faculty who would participate in interviews. These institutional contacts helped us communicate with the college president to determine if the college was willing to participate in the study. We approached four community colleges, with three agreeing to participate. After the institution agreed to participate, we asked the institutional contacts to identify and provide contact information for 15 faculty members who were considered "effective" in facilitating the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students, but allowed each institution to establish the definition of effective. We asked the institutional contact to seek nominations from a variety of constituencies: students, staff members, faculty, and administrators at the college. After receiving the nominations, we sent each possible participant a letter asking if they were willing to be interviewed as part of this project and providing the necessary information to contact the researchers if they were agreeable to participating. Individuals who agreed to be interviewed received a packet of information

concerning this project that included: an introductory letter, a consent form that fully informed them of the purpose and the process of the research, and sample questions similar to those used during the interview. Our goal was to conduct a minimum of 12 interviews at each community college. We completed a total of 41 interviews, 14 at RCC and UCC, respectively, and 13 at SCC.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were asked to provide some basic information concerning their involvement on their college campuses. As shown in Table 1, 37 of the 41 (90%) individuals we interviewed held faculty positions, three were administrators, and one person held a combined faculty/professional staff position. Each of the three administrators had previously held faculty positions, and they were nominated based on those experiences. The individuals we interviewed were overwhelmingly employed full time at one of the participating institutions (39 out of 41, 95%). The length of service presented in the table represents the years of service at the participating colleges. In many cases, the participants had additional years of experience at other educational institutions.

**Table 1**  
Interviewee Demographics

	Rural College	Suburban College	Urban College	Total
<b>Position</b>				
Faculty/Instructor	13	10	14	37
Administrator/Staff	1	2		3
Faculty/Staff		1		1
<b>Employment Status</b>				
Full time	13	12	14	39
Part time	1	1		2
<b>Length of Service</b>				
1-5	7	2	4	13
6-10	3	3	6	12
11-15	2	3	0	5
16-20	1	1		2
21-25	1	1	1	3
26 +		3	3	6

We also asked faculty to identify the courses they were teaching during the semester of the interview. As shown in Table 2, a breadth in courses and disciplines was represented among the participants. While many of the faculty members taught multiple sections of the same class, others taught three to five different courses.

**Table 2**  
Instructional Areas of Interviewees

Discipline	RCC	SCC	UCC
Math/Science	4	3	—
Social Science	4	1	5
Career/Vocational	5	1	3
Fine Arts/Humanities	2	5	8
Developmental	5	7	3

We were also interested in determining if the respondents had opportunities to interact with students outside of the classroom by serving as an advisor or the sponsor of a club or organization. Three of the respondents at RCC, eight of the respondents at SCC, and five of the respondents at UCC indicated that they were currently serving as sponsors of clubs or organizations. Eight of these individuals were sponsoring organizations related to cultural identity, and five individuals were sponsoring organizations related to academic disciplines.

Prior to the scheduled campus visits, the participants were contacted via email to arrange a time to conduct the interview. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in an office or conference room provided by the institution or in the interviewees' offices. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were asked if they had read the consent form, offered the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and then were asked to sign the consent form. The researcher kept the signed copy of the consent form and the interviewee received a copy as well. The interviews were audio recorded and the interviewers also kept field notes as supplementary information. The interviews were conducted over a span of seven months during the 2007-08 academic year.

The interviews were conducted using a structured interview guide as well as probes for each of the questions. Interview questions were developed from the guiding questions of the study. The probes could either be a further explanation of the question asked or they could ask the interviewees to further explain or elaborate on their responses to the question. In this manner, the researchers sought to obtain as thorough a response to the questions asked as possible. To protect the anonymity of participants, we assigned each interviewee a code and identified them only by that code.

A professional transcriptionist converted the audio recordings to written transcripts. We started the analysis process by independently coding eight transcripts and then met to compare our findings. We coded the remaining transcripts independently and held subsequent sessions to discuss and reach consensus regarding the analyses. Creswell (2008) explained the coding process as:

*... make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes. Also in this process you will select specific data to use and disregard other data that do not specifically provide evidence for your themes (p. 251).*

The researchers used both in vivo coding as well as lean coding. In vivo coding uses words or phrases directly taken from the transcripts. For lean coding, the researcher only assigns a few codes to large amounts of material (p. 252).

According to Creswell (2008), "describing and developing themes from the data consists of answering the major research questions and forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomena through description and thematic development" (p. 254). We first present the description of first-generation Hispanic students provided by the faculty members and their perceptions of community college attributes that have contributed to student success. Four primary themes are then discussed.

### **Characteristics of First-generation Hispanic Students**

When asked to describe the characteristics of first-generation Hispanic students, community college faculty spoke at length about barriers that frequently hinder access and success. Statements about the need to overcome barriers were equally distributed among the three participating institutions. Three subthemes emerged to describe these barriers: personal attributes, the lack of understanding about the academy, and the lack of college readiness.

There is consensus that Hispanic community college students are more likely to have personal attributes that hinder participation or contribute to attrition such as working full time or having multiple part-time jobs that are equal to or exceed full-time employment, being married, having children, or financially supporting an extended family (NCES, 2002). The community college faculty we interviewed provided numerous examples that indicate these attributes continue to negatively impact the educational attainment of Hispanics. Family commitment is a characteristic common to most Hispanic cultures (Griggs & Dunn, 1996), and the responsibility to both immediate and extended family was certainly evident in the stories that were shared with us.

Faculty related they often become aware that Hispanic students are first generation college by their demonstrated lack of understanding of the academy. Stanton-Salazar (1997) has used the concept of social capital to illustrate that Hispanics lack a network of family and other individuals to provide guidance about the college-going process. More than an understanding of the application and financial aid process, participants pointed to fundamental differences between high school and college. In the American high school, classes meet each day. In college, classes meet a variety of times during the week. In high school, books are passed out on the first day. In college, you are expected to purchase your books prior to the first class session. A number of faculty pointed to students who had been “passed through” the American educational system. One faculty member stressed, “it isn’t necessarily a benefit to have attended high school in America.”

First generation Latino students also have barriers to overcome in terms of their preparation for college-level work. We describe this subtheme as academic readiness, as participants pointed to a general lack of habits necessary for college such as adequately preparing to participate in class and note-taking and study skills. Language difficulties, for students with Spanish as a primary language, and a lack of writing skills were also cited as academic barriers.

### **Differences within the Hispanic Student Population**

The term Hispanic was developed by the U.S. government to provide a common description to a diverse group of individuals with connections to Spanish language or culture from a Spanish-speaking country. We were not able to find previous studies that examined differences in the classroom by subdivisions within the Hispanic population (i.e., Mexican, Central and South American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, other Hispanic). As this is one of only a few studies that have examined the community college classroom from the perspective of Hispanic student success, we did not attempt to explore this issue. Community college faculty did indicate, however, that they were aware of cultural differences between these subdivisions and that they perceive that these differences impacted the classroom. There are a number of studies that have identified differences among Hispanic populations by gender, age, and the length of time that individuals have lived in the U.S. (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilas, 2005; Cardoza, 1991; Gonzales et al, 2004; Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Rendon & Valadez, 1993). We were interested in the perceptions of the community college faculty we interviewed about the demographic differences they had observed among the first-generation Hispanic students in their classrooms.

### **Traditional-aged vs. non-traditional-aged students**

A number of faculty indicated that they were able to distinguish some traditional-aged (trads) students who have lived longer in the United States, perhaps for all of their lives, and had not had a positive experience in the K-12 education system. Indicators included a tendency to distrust faculty members, to appear less than eager to be at the community college, even to be angry. They sense that the anger stems from the students' belief that they have been discriminated against by American society and therefore have a "chip on their shoulders." Some trads with this attitude have not handled criticism very well and drop out quickly upon encountering academic difficulty.

Non-traditional-aged (non-trads) students were characterized as being enthusiastic and appreciative about the opportunity to attend college. Non-trads appear hesitant or timid in comparison to trads. A faculty member explained, "The older Hispanic students seem to have lost a lot of self-confidence, especially if they've been in the United States for a while. They've been stepped on and scorned because of their language skills or non-language skills. So I would say yes that they're more timid than the younger ones and more timid than other ethnic groups." Non-trads were described as more diligent or serious about their studies in comparison to trads, but they appear to struggle more with the coursework. Non-trads have also been more likely to initiate a relationship with the instructor and, as a consequence, are more open with the professor and willing to ask for assistance. Some faculty indicated that, at times, non-trads request an inordinate amount of support, stemming from a lack of confidence and the desire for frequent confirmation that they are "on track." Non-trads have been more likely to show up for class late...this appears to be due to the other responsibilities such as taking children to school, carpooling with their spouses because they have only one car, or work schedules.

### **Males vs. females**

First-generation Hispanic males are described as more confident than females, however, this is relative due to the typical shy or timid approach the overwhelming majority of first-generation Hispanic students demonstrate when first entering a class setting. Younger men have not been quite as timid as older males, and younger men have not been as serious about their studies as are older Hispanic males. Regardless of their age, Hispanic males have demonstrated a reluctance to share personal information in front of the other students or to be called on or singled out in class. Hispanic males do not want to be perceived as needing outside assistance; they have demonstrated their



cultural values by often turning to female students for help with coursework. A few female faculty members had encountered Hispanic males who had difficulty developing a trusting relationship with the professor. Other female faculty indicated that they did not take an authoritarian stance with males, especially with older males. Hispanic males are focused on economic considerations and securing financial resources is their number one priority. Education is viewed as a means to this end, but Hispanic males appear to be more likely to drop a class if things are not as they expect them to be.

Female Hispanic students are reported as typically more responsible and conscientious about their education. One interviewee explained that younger females “are breaking the mold already because normally, by this age, many of them might otherwise be married or have a child. I see a little bit of conflict, but yet, most of the Hispanic females that I see coming here are going to go into transfer (programs).” Therefore, the women are more committed to doing well and maximizing their learning. Hispanic females have told their professors that once they gain a level of comfort they enjoy opening up in class as they take more submissive roles when they return home. The faculty concurred that, once comfortable in the classroom setting, Hispanic females can be quite gregarious. In comparison to males, Hispanic women have been more willing to accept constructive criticism, to make efforts to improve their work, and to utilize institutional resources to help them succeed in their academic objectives.

### **Recent immigrants vs. native or longer-term residents**

Recent immigrants appear to fit one of two categories, either they have completed a substantial amount of education in their respective home country or they have not progressed past lower-level elementary grades before coming to the United States. Difficulty with the spoken English language is the first distinguishing feature of both categories. Highly-educated immigrants are often impatient to get through the “hurdles” at the community college. Sometimes they want to skip steps in the process, which has been detrimental to their learning the material as needed in the U.S. (licensure or certificate requirements for example). Recent immigrants with limited educational experience usually are very shy and clearly do not understand academic processes. They have been, however, extremely grateful for educational opportunities. There are also Hispanics who have resided in the U.S. for a considerable period of time who have limited to no proficiency with the English language. These individuals have displayed an embarrassment that they have lived in the country for so long without developing any language skills.



## Community College Attributes that Facilitate Student Success

We were also interested in faculty perceptions as to the attributes of community colleges that contribute to efforts to improve first-generation Hispanic student success. Most often mentioned, was the community college emphasis on teaching and learning. Community colleges have also programmed a variety of developmental courses for students who are academically underprepared and offered support programs for students who encounter difficulty in completing coursework.

At RCC and UCC, faculty also pointed to the extension of the college into the community as important to developing a culture of success and instilling trust in the Hispanic community. At RCC students are engaged in the community through a variety of course assignments. The institution is also engaged with the community through its commitment to provide learning centers that focus language skills in a major workplace in one community and in public libraries in two additional communities. At UCC, an even greater number of faculty utilize field trips and assignments to take the students into the community. In addition, faculty are actively involved in recruitment in the Hispanic community and administrators and faculty have taken leadership roles with community agencies such as food banks and Habitat for Humanity. We did not interview faculty at SCC who were directly involved in community activities, but several indicated there were service learning opportunities. There were a number of SCC faculty who pointed to the philosophy of an “if you offer it, they will come” attitude, and these individuals expressed the opinion that this was one reason why they had not had greater success with first-generation Hispanic students. One faculty member stressed, “I think that if we called ourselves a community college, we (the administration, faculty, staff) need to be actively engaged in helping the community address pertinent issues ... and we are not involved with the Hispanic community.”

A final attribute that contributes to first-generation Hispanic student success is the flexibility and adaptability of the community college in order to meet the needs of its various constituencies. Student feedback at SCC revealed frustration with the applicability of assignments in developmental courses. Based on this feedback, SCC faculty have developed “paired” courses, one developmental and the other for college credit. For example, a developmental writing course is paired with an academic course which requires predominately written assignments. Preliminary results indicate increases in both retention and success.

*Community colleges have programmed a variety of developmental courses for students who are academically underprepared and offered support programs for students who encounter difficulty in completing coursework.*

## Culture Matters

The three participating community colleges are in geographic areas that have experienced significant growth in Hispanic populations and each respective institution has experienced similar increases in Hispanic enrollments. Although each community college indicated attempts to increase Hispanic representation among the administration, faculty, and staff, the fact remains that the majority of faculty are white and non-Hispanic. The community college faculty we interviewed stressed that “culture matters,” and pointed to knowledge, appreciation and sensitivity to Hispanic culture as a key component to facilitating the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students. We identified three subthemes under the broader theme of culture matters.

### Cultural characteristics

Participants shared examples that indicate that stereotyped sex roles continue to exist among first-generation Hispanic students. Specifically, females feel pressured to get married and have children, and males feel pressure to provide for the family. At RCC, there were reports of a high rate of pregnancy among Hispanic high school females. Teenage pregnancy has previously been identified as a reason that Hispanic females in rural areas do not participate in postsecondary education (Cejda & Short, 2008). Faculty from UCC provided more than one story of a female being “shunned” by the extended family for deciding to pursue postsecondary education rather than getting married and starting a family. A faculty member at SCC shared the story of a traditional-aged Latina whose father would not let her attend a selective female-only institution that was approximately five hours away because it was “too far from home.” Previous research has also found that leaving home was one of the major challenges Latinas faced when deciding to attend college (Gonzales, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004). We were struck by the number of comments about Hispanic males who had demonstrated the ability to be successful in college, but left because of the need to provide financial support for their extended family. In addition, males at RCC and UCC tended to pursue vocational programs, based on the need for employment and income. The examples we heard related to financial considerations match previous research regarding the selection of fields of study (McGlynn, 2004; Rendon & Valdez, 1993) and challenges to persistence and transfer to four-year institutions (Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004; Rendon, Justiz, & Resta, 1988).

### Cultural understanding

As Torres (2006) pointed out, “students do not leave their cultural values at the door” (p. 316). As mentioned earlier, family commitment is a characteristic common to most Hispanic cultures. In explaining the importance of the family in Hispanic culture, Rendon and Valadez (1993) illustrated that financial support is a primary aspect of commitment to family. In analyzing the transcripts of interviews, we found an “order of importance” with the family considered as most important, employment as next important, and participating in postsecondary education a distant third. In other words, the majority of faculty indicated that Hispanic students are reluctant to place education over family and work.



The number of faculty who explained that Hispanic students turn to each other for help, rather than approaching the instructor, also emphasized the cultural norm of a reliance on family. Agencies that work with immigrant Hispanic populations have found that prior negative experiences in the country of origin often leave Hispanics wary of authority figures (McMahon, 2002). One faculty member shared, "It is important to earn the trust of Latino students. To do that, I try to establish a learning community within my classroom and adopt a role as a member of the community rather than as the authority figure." Other authorities have pointed to the conflict in the cooperative nature of goals attainment found in Hispanic cultures and the more typical competitive environment in U.S. classrooms (Vasquez, 1990).

A number of faculty also mentioned the role and authority structure found in many Hispanic cultures: the male as dominant and strong, the female as nurturing and self-sacrificing. As Baron (1991) explained, this is not male chauvinism or "machismo." In traditional Hispanic family hierarchy, the head of the household is the oldest male and that person will typically make decisions. One faculty member echoed the incorrect use of the term, stressing that "a real sense of machismo is a person who takes care of his family, takes care of business, who is focused in life." Comments from faculty indicated that Hispanic males often turn to Hispanic females for help and that males often take a dominant role in group activities.

## Hispanic learning preferences

Overwhelmingly, the participants related that Hispanic students had a definite preference for social learning. Activities that involved interacting with other students, peer-learning, and group work were cited over and over as components contributing to the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students. Such activities also factor in the cultural aspect of cooperation rather than competition. Sanchez (2000) contended that learning preferences needed to be considered in designing and delivering a supportive environment. Numerous faculty indicated the importance of a supportive environment to enable the faculty member to provide constructive feedback about classroom performance that was not viewed as “personal” criticism by Hispanic students.

## The Hispanic Student as a Learner

There is consensus that a relationship exists between the culture a student lives in and his or her preferred ways of learning (Guild, 1994). Sanchez (2000) incorporated Curry’s Theoretical Model of Learning Style Components and Effects (1991) to analyze the learning preferences of Hispanics at

three levels: motivational maintenance, task engagement, and cognitive strategies.

We also used this model to analyze the observations of community college faculty regarding the learning preferences of first-generation Hispanic learners.

*Hispanic students have demonstrated a preference for cooperation and collaboration rather than individualism and competition.*

The motivational maintenance level considers the preferred method of interacting with faculty members and peers and the willingness to work on a task and persist through completion of the task. As indicated earlier, the community college faculty we interviewed described Hispanic students as social learners. They have been observed spending this time developing relationships or support groups, asking each other questions, discussing assignments, and verifying deadlines. One faculty member indicated, “What I will see is particularly before and after class, in those critical 10 to 15 minutes, (is a) high level of interaction (among Hispanic students). And what they’re doing is build(ing) relationships and a support network. A teacher can either encourage that by being flexible with time, or destroy it by forcing students to (start) right on time.” Implied in that statement, and reinforced in other interviews, is the fact that Hispanic students turn to their peers for assistance before they will ask the professor.

The faculty have observed that Hispanic students prefer to sit together in class and to work in small groups rather than as individuals. When they go on field trips they prefer to travel in groups so that they can share the experience. If they have a class assignment that requires them to interact with individuals or organizations, they prefer to do so in twos or threes rather than by themselves. In short, Hispanic students have demonstrated a preference for cooperation and collaboration rather than individualism and competition.

Hispanic students have appreciated a high level of formative feedback and appreciate receiving feedback in a manner that is constructive and encouraging. The manner in which they receive feedback is also important, as Hispanic students have indicated that they prefer that individual feedback from a professor does not occur in front of their classmates. In terms of summative evaluation, Hispanic students have valued professors who find reasons to recognize the accomplishments of the class as a whole. Even small celebrations are reported as highly effective motivational tools.

The task engagement level of Curry's model considers the processing work required by the learning task. Hispanic students have shown a greater interest in learning when they are able to connect the class materials to their personal experiences. A number of faculty indicated that they used journals as a way to encourage students to relate course material to their personal lives. Journaling activities have been well received by Hispanic students and sharing information from their journals with each other serves as a mechanism to encourage active participation in the class.

The faculty have observed that Hispanic students prefer a building block approach to processing material. Many of the faculty members shared that they begin the class by reviewing concepts and materials from the previous class session before they introduce new material. Others have observed that Hispanic students need time to reflect on information before they are ready to ask questions. They have often used a "reflection assignment" approach—"Your assignment is to come to the next class with two questions about the material we covered today." Others indicated that Hispanic students prefer to process abstract concepts or theories in a step-by-step rather than holistic approach.

The cognitive strategies level of Curry's model involves the processes of receiving and retaining information. When discussing higher-order cognitive processing, faculty stressed the preference of Hispanic students to active approaches to learning. In this regard, developing games to show that information had been received and retained was the most common instructional technique. The interviewees were quick to point out that while Hispanic students, in general, do not respond well to competition, they have thrived in classes where active learning techniques are used to facilitate their learning.

A second active learning strategy has been assignments that require students to find additional information on a topic and to share that information with the class. This strategy requires the student to make judgments, selecting the additional information and the manner they use to present the information. The faculty also observed that Hispanic students prefer application in a "real world" setting. A number of faculty incorporate simulations, a capstone assignment, or field trips so that students can either demonstrate or view the application of the classroom to work or life situations.

It is important that we point out that none of the individuals we interviewed specifically design instruction or assignments to meet the preferred learning styles of Hispanic students and that they pointed to the wide variations in preferences among the Hispanic population. A number of faculty stressed that Hispanic students can and have adapted to different instructional approaches. Many Hispanic students have not had extensive experiences with other cultures. When they are able to experience these as part of class activities and to see the benefits that derive from the adaptation they have been more than willing to apply different approaches to learning.

### **The Classroom Environment**

In their investigation of faculty in four-year institutions, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) concluded that “The educational context created by faculty behaviors and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement” (p. 180). Sanchez (2000) found that creating a classroom environment that considers the learning preferences of Hispanic students is crucial to improving student learning and, thus, persistence. The community college faculty we interviewed emphasized that they did not tailor the classroom or assignments specifically for Hispanic students. We identified three subthemes that illustrate how these faculty members placed attention on creating an environment where all students, including underserved and at-risk populations, had the opportunity to be academically successful.

### **Developing relationships with students**

In order to engage students in the classroom, successful community college faculty have first developed relationships with their students. As mentioned previously, many Hispanics are wary of anyone in an authority position—developing relationships with students is a way to earn their trust. One faculty member indicated, “I try to learn one thing about the life of each student, and I find that if I share something from my life with them, they are more willing to share with me.” Others spoke of engaging the student outside of the classroom in casual conversation or developing relationships by attending social or cultural activities. Hispanic students have responded positively to personal attention and, once a relationship is developed, value one-on-one time with faculty.

### **Classroom learning communities**

Tinto (1997) described the broader process of academic integration from the perspective of multiple classroom communities that exist within the larger academic program. The faculty we spoke with, in large part, agreed with that statement, again stressing that creating a learning community facilitates the academic success of all students. How have these individuals created such an environment? They have been patient, used humor, and let the students know that mistakes were okay. As many community college students have a low level of self-esteem, they have worked to build their confidence through frequent feedback and encouragement.

Creating a supportive learning community does not mean that faculty have lowered their standards or expectations. Rather, many of the faculty related that they have initiated learning communities through frank discussions that emphasize standards and expectations. Through this initial discussion, faculty were able to provide information on available academic support services, to outline their willingness and availability to work with students outside of class, and often allowed time so that study groups could be organized. “It is important for the class to understand that the goal is for everyone to accomplish the desired outcomes at a level that is acceptable for a college class and to realize that I won’t lower my standards or expectations just so everyone receives a passing grade,” explained one faculty member. At the same time, the interviewees also indicated the importance of maintaining standards without discouraging students. A number of faculty pointed to using the step-by-step approach described in the previous section as a strategy to promote success by evaluating progress in much smaller segments. Most have used multiple formative evaluations to prepare the student for a summative evaluation and often allow a student to submit work for the formative evaluation stage numerous times.

In terms of Hispanic students, a number of faculty members emphasized the importance of being flexible with time in order to create learning communities. As quoted earlier in the paper, one faculty member pointed to flexibility at the beginning and end of class periods. Others spoke of extending the class time by starting earlier or staying later—allowing students to attend the time segment that best fit their schedules and needs. Faculty have been careful to not call on Hispanic students in class if they have perceived that doing so makes them uncomfortable. They have been nonconfrontational in evaluating student work, focusing on suggestions for improvement rather than elaborating on shortcomings. If language is a problem, they have acted things out, drawn pictures, or utilized interpreters. Several reported exhaustively searching for texts and other learning resources in the native language of the students and allowing them to speak in their native tongue. Many have incorporated peer tutoring or study groups to provide supplementary instruction.





### **Developing an appreciation of culture**

Community college faculty who have facilitated the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students point to the importance of gaining some knowledge and sensitivity to Hispanic cultures. The faculty we spoke with showed an interest in the culture by attending and celebrating Hispanic events with the students. Many encouraged students to share their culture in classroom assignments and discussion. When warranted, they stressed cultural relevance to the course content. Recognizing that Hispanics value the community rather than the individual, a significant number of faculty have also incorporated community issues or focus on matters of social justice to apply abstract theory and classroom learning to practical real-life and work applications.

Cultural appreciation, however, was not a one-way street. Many faculty have encouraged Hispanic students to learn about other cultures—African, Middle Eastern, Asian, and Anglo were specifically mentioned. One means to explore other cultures is through popular media; newspapers and magazines, television, movies, and popular music were referenced as ways to expand cultural awareness. Equally important is introducing the student to the culture of college. We experienced groups of faculty committed to student success at each of the institutions we visited. One institution, however, stood out for an organizational approach to welcoming students and instilling a sense of belonging. UCC can be described as an institution that practices celebratory socialization (Tierney, 1997) by valuing and recognizing the distinctiveness of the students' culture and building on their socialization into the college culture through a variety of academic and student support programs.





## Student Involvement

Tinto (1997) suggested that thinking of social and academic systems of colleges as separate from one another hid the relationship between these two areas of activities. Mina et al. (2004) expanded even further beyond the college, contending that Latino success also was dependent on the family and community. The structured questions of this research project did not specifically ask about Hispanic student engagement on the community college campus. Some interviewees, however, agreed with Mina and her associates, contending that Hispanic student success was dependent on the interplay between multiple entities due to differences in community colleges and differences in Hispanic community college students.

Faculty indicated that Hispanic students are involved in activities on their campuses. RCC is the only institution that had student housing available, and the multicultural club sponsors various on-campus activities in the evenings. We witnessed lunch-time activities targeted to Hispanic students during our visits to SCC and UCC. Faculty indicated that they often encourage students to attend or become involved in on-campus activities because they seem reluctant to participate. Several stressed the opportunities to develop relationships with students by attending events—and recommended that faculty take an active role in campus activities and not just point them out to students.

With employment and family commitments, some students do not have time to become involved in campus activities and programs. Integrating the classroom and the community through assignments, service learning, or community service activities has provided opportunities for Hispanic students to become more deeply engaged without sacrificing other commitments. This type of engagement also demonstrates the transference from the classroom to work or real-life situations.

## Concluding Comments

From an access viewpoint, our major recommendation would be to find the means to inform Hispanics about the higher education system. Regardless of whether the setting was rural,

*“You don’t recruit a Hispanic student, you recruit the student’s family.”*

suburban, or urban, community college faculty reported that Hispanic high school students have a lack of knowledge about college. Participating in K-16 educational initiatives would be one means of providing information about college-going decisions and college-attending behaviors to potential Hispanic students. Because

of the influence of family and community in Hispanic cultures, it is also imperative that parents and Hispanic community leaders have accurate and up-to-date information to provide guidance and advice. One faculty member stressed, “You don’t recruit a Hispanic student, you recruit the student’s family.” Partnerships with community organizations and agencies would be one possible avenue to reach parents and community leaders.

It is important to realize, however, that many potential Hispanic students and their families are not likely to approach authority figures for assistance. Therefore, recommendations to use current Hispanic college students and Hispanic parents, community leaders, and community organizations as information sources makes sense (Mina, Cabrales, Juarez, & Rodriguez-Vasquez, 2004; Santiago, 2007). Based on the likelihood of Hispanic community college students “turning to their own,” we would encourage the participating institutions to continue efforts to increase Hispanic representation in the administration, faculty, and staff.

Community college faculty who were identified as facilitating the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students reported that they do not do anything “different,” specifically for Hispanic students. They have, however, recognized that students enrolled in their classes will have a variety of cultural experiences and learning style preferences. Moreover, they have worked hard to incorporate these experiences and preferences into the classroom. We found faculty members participating in formal and informal groups, striving to understand the cultures of underrepresented populations on their respective campuses, working to improve their instruction and to create environments that facilitate student success. While some of the commitment can be attributed to administrative leadership, it is evident that faculty leadership has greatly contributed to developing and sustaining efforts to facilitate student success.

Virtually all of the faculty we spoke with share the perception that new faculty hires need to be aware of the nature of the community college, the students that attend the institution, and Hispanic culture. At UCC, we found a model yearlong orientation program that includes information on the student population, instruction on learning styles, and exposure to the various resources available to them and to the students on their campus. In addition, there were continuing professional development activities for returning faculty that also focused on student success. At RCC and SCC, smaller groups of faculty were beginning to meet to discuss ways to improve the academic success of first-generation Hispanics.

Although faculty leadership is important, faculty working alone will not be able to sustain an on-going professional development agenda. Community colleges that have an interest in helping first-generation Hispanic students succeed academically on their campuses need to develop a culture of caring and support on their campuses. It is important for the administration to work with faculty to develop a series of structured professional development seminars that help faculty and the student affairs professionals better understand the cultures of historically underrepresented students. In addition, seminars can be conducted that help faculty improve their classroom process, pedagogy, and approach to students. For campuses with multiple sites, communication becomes even more



important. Encouraging faculty and student affairs professionals to learn new approaches and to share “what works” and “lessons learned” lays the groundwork to develop a broader culture of student learning and success.

A genuine passion and philosophy of the community college as an “opportunity college” was prevalent among the faculty we interviewed. It is important to note that, with the exception of two individuals, we encountered full-time faculty. Our field notes

and debriefings after each visit focused on the amount of time these individuals dedicate to crafting quality educational environments for such a diverse student population. The faculty we interviewed were united in enouncing that, for the first-generation Hispanic population, developing a personal relationship with the students was the initial step to effectively engage students in the classroom. Additional research is needed to explore the question of how adjunct faculty members are able to develop relationships and handle the necessary time commitment.

As this study bears out, culture matters when working with Hispanic students. The greater the amount of time and effort faculty dedicate to learning and appreciating Hispanic culture, the better able they will be to help first-generation Hispanic students adapt and progress through the academic rigors of their campuses. Part of this cultural aspect is the need for the college to be seen as an active agent in the Hispanic community. We described the faculty we interviewed as passionate because not one complained about the time commitment. We would strongly suggest, however, that administrators at each of these institutions recognize the efforts to facilitate student success and develop appropriate support and reward mechanisms.

## Summary

As mentioned in the methodology, this study was developed from four guiding questions.

### *How do community college faculty characterize first-generation Hispanic students?*

Community college faculty identified significant barriers that first-generation Hispanic students face in their efforts to pursue and be successful in postsecondary education. These barriers include personal attributes that hinder participation or contribute to attrition, a lack of understanding regarding the college-going process, and a lack of college readiness.

### *What attributes of the community college contribute to efforts to facilitate the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students?*

The faculty we interviewed stressed that there were a number of attributes of the community college that facilitate the academic success of all students. The first of these is the community college emphasis on teaching and learning. Developmental courses to assist underprepared students and tutoring and other academic support programs to assist students who encounter difficulties in completing courses were also identified as attributes that facilitate success for all students. In terms of first-generation Hispanic students, the extension of the community college into the Hispanic community was cited as an important attribute to facilitate first generation academic success.

### *What strategies do community college faculty use to facilitate the academic success of first-generation Hispanic students?*

Community college faculty stress the importance of developing strategies based on knowledge of the Hispanic cultural characteristics and values and an understanding that Hispanic students indicate a preference toward social learning. Based on the responses from the interviews, we have developed the following 10 recommendations to facilitate academic success.

- Develop personal relationships with students—learn something personal about each student and share something personal about yourself.
- Be flexible with time at the beginning and end of each class.
- Create a positive environment by creating a learning community within the class.
- Emphasize active learning strategies.
- Incorporate cooperative learning.
- Connect class materials to personal, work, or real-life experiences.
- Present material in a step-by-step or building block approach, connecting new learning to previous material.
- Establish and maintain high standards.
- Provide frequent formative feedback in a constructive and encouraging manner.
- Recognize the accomplishments of the class as a whole.

*Do community college faculty use the same strategies as four-year faculty to create classroom environments that promote student engagement?*

Community college faculty do incorporate course-related interactions, active and collaborative learning techniques, academic challenge, higher-order cognitive activities, and academic enrichment activities as strategies that promote student engagement. As one faculty member stressed, "If I am able to engage a student in the class, to move them from being a passive to an active learner, then I feel that I have contributed to their academic success. At the community college, engagement is the key to success."

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