

In the Austin Independent School District (AISD), the percentage of Hispanic graduates who enrolled in a postsecondary institution increased from 32% in 2002 to 52% in 2010. However, during this period, in accordance with national trends, Hispanic graduates had a lower college-going rate than did graduates of other ethnicities, especially with respect to enrollment in 4-year institutions (Alderete, Coneway, & Schmitt, 2006, 2007; Garland, 2008, 2009; Gossman, 2009, 2011).

As Austin's Hispanic population continues to grow, the future economic prospects of the city will depend more heavily on the education and skills of Hispanic residents, who currently compose about 35% of the city's population (Robinson, 2010). Estimates of educational levels needed for jobs through 2018 show 62% requiring at least some college (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). If Hispanic students lag behind non-Hispanic students in postsecondary enrollment, their future economic prospects, and those of Austin, could suffer lasting repercussions.

Explanations for Hispanic students' low college enrollment rates include differences with non-Hispanic students with regard to academic qualifications for entering college, immigrant status, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and the mother's level of education (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). However, these factors alone do not fully account for the enrollment gap, especially in 4-year colleges. To understand what the other explanatory factors could be, and thus to be able to address the issue effectively, Hispanic and non-Hispanic seniors' demographic characteristics and answers to the AISD High School Exit Survey in 2011 were analyzed.

AISD Hispanic seniors in 2011 were found to have several characteristics that could put them at a disadvantage for postsecondary enrollment and significantly distinguished them from their non-Hispanic peers:

- The majority (67%) were economically disadvantaged.
- Many were immigrants (14%) or English language learners (17%) or both. Some may have been undocumented or had parents who were undocumented.
- Almost half (49%) reported having a parent who did not graduate from high school, and less than a third (26%) reported having a parent who graduated from a 2-year or 4-year college.
- On average, Hispanic seniors had lower grade point averages (GPAs) and standardized exam scores than did their non-Hispanic peers.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the experience of preparing for the future after high school graduation was different for Hispanic students than it was for non-Hispanic students (Gossman, Looby, & Pazera, 2011). A subsequent analysis found Hispanic seniors' responses to the 2011 High School Exit Survey significantly differed from those of non-Hispanic seniors for most of the questions.

Identifying these differences might lead to an understanding of the low postsecondary enrollment rates among Hispanic seniors. This report describes some of the differences in high school experiences of Hispanic and non-Hispanic seniors, as reported on the 2011 High School Exit Survey. The findings were grouped based on categories known to influence postsecondary enrollment and are summarized below.

Family Influences

- Parents of Hispanic seniors were reported to have a lower level of involvement at school in the seniors' academic and school life than did parents of non-Hispanic seniors. Conclusions could not be drawn about parents' involvement at home because the measures were insufficient.

Postsecondary Intentions

- Hispanic seniors started thinking about college much later than did their non-Hispanic peers, possibly influencing their academic and behavioral choices, which ultimately had an impact on postsecondary enrollment. Among Hispanic seniors, the largest percentage started thinking about college in high school (41% compared with 21% of non-Hispanic seniors). Twenty-four percent of Hispanic seniors indicated they had thought about college for "as long as I can remember," whereas 48% of non-Hispanic seniors gave that response.
- A significantly lower percentage of Hispanic seniors than of non-Hispanic seniors intended to go to a 4-year college or attend any college, although the percentage of Hispanic seniors intending to attend a 2-year institution was higher than the percentage of non-Hispanic seniors intending to do so. Forty-four percent of Hispanic seniors intended to enroll in a 4-year college, compared with 68% of non-Hispanic seniors, and 89% of Hispanics seniors intended to continue their education after high school, compared with 93% of non-Hispanic seniors. Forty-five percent of Hispanic seniors intended to enroll in a 2-year college, compared with 25% of non-Hispanic seniors.
- Fifty-one percent of the Hispanic seniors who intended to enroll in a 2-year institution indicated they also intended to transfer to a 4-year college eventually. Unfortunately, at the national level, less than a quarter of students who plan to complete a bachelor's degree and initially enroll in a 2-year college ultimately attain that degree (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006).

Taking Steps to Postsecondary Education

- A significantly lower percentage of Hispanic seniors than of non-Hispanic seniors took steps to prepare for postsecondary education.
- When asked how prepared they felt for the postsecondary application process, a significantly lower percentage of Hispanic seniors than of non-Hispanic seniors indicated they felt at least somewhat prepared (77% and 85%, respectively).

- Hispanic seniors at AISD (51%) sought support from appropriate school staff for career and college guidance at about the same rate as did non-Hispanic students (53%) in 2011. A higher rate might have been expected from Hispanic seniors, given their greater need.
- Hispanic seniors were significantly less likely than were non-Hispanic seniors to apply to any type of postsecondary institution (83% and 93%, respectively). Applications to 4-year institutions showed a larger gap, with 60% of Hispanic seniors indicating they had applied, compared with 81% of non-Hispanic seniors. The gap existed regardless of GPA. Of seniors with GPAs of 3.5 or above their junior year, 63% of Hispanic seniors had applied to a 4-year college compared with 85% of non-Hispanic seniors.
- Hispanic seniors spent fewer hours per week studying, doing research, or completing homework assignments outside of class than did non-Hispanic seniors. Thirty-six percent of Hispanic seniors spent 6 or more hours doing schoolwork outside of class, compared with 48% of non-Hispanic seniors. A higher percentage of Hispanic seniors were working (51%) their senior year, taking care of family members (23%), or both, compared with non-Hispanic seniors (46% and 18%, respectively).

School Participation, Engagement, and Academic Self-Confidence

- For each of the six indicators on the 2011 High School Exit Survey, a lower percentage of Hispanic seniors than of non-Hispanic seniors reported having a quality relationship with a teacher. Almost 40% of Hispanic seniors reported not knowing a teacher who was aware of what they would be doing the following year. This indicator showed the greatest gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic seniors (10 percentage points).
- In half of the school-based extracurricular activities offered in AISD, a significantly lower percentage of Hispanic seniors than of non-Hispanic seniors indicated having participated at least 1 year.
- Hispanic seniors were more emotionally and cognitively engaged in school than were non-Hispanic seniors, and they had higher academic self-confidence regarding high school work. They were less confident than were non-Hispanic seniors, however, in their ability to do college-level work.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several characteristics of AISD Hispanic seniors may have influenced their academic achievement and put them at a disadvantage for postsecondary enrollment. These characteristics significantly distinguished them from their non-Hispanic peers. Despite Hispanic seniors being engaged in school and confident about their academic abilities, obstacles stand in their way to accessing a postsecondary education, reaching their academic potential, and joining the workforce in positions that meet their abilities.

The school district is not in a position to influence policies that could change characteristics such as a

family's economic status, parents' level of education, and immigration status. However, knowledge about these characteristics and their influence on postsecondary enrollment can inform strategies to address the enrollment issue. Detailed recommendations, informed by the existing research and High School Exit Survey results, are presented in the full report and in a separate research brief. The recommendations suggest ways to create a college-going culture at every campus, at both the elementary and secondary level, and to provide the support students and parents need to make a postsecondary education a reality.

Full Report

DRE reports may be accessed online at <http://www.austinisd.org/dre/search>. The title of the full report is *Focus on Hispanic Seniors: 2011 High School Exit Survey and Postsecondary Enrollment*.

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About the Department of Research and Evaluation

The Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) was established in 1972 to support program decision making and strategic planning in AISD. The department is housed in the Office of Accountability and is charged with evaluating federal, state, and locally funded programs in AISD.

About the author

Carol Pazera focuses on programs and initiatives implemented for middle and high school students. Throughout her career, she has assisted numerous nonprofit organizations in the development of evaluation processes and instruments. She also co-founded and led an agency that served high school students in Austin who were at risk of dropping out of school. Carol earned a B.A. in secondary education from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, an M.A. in Latin American Studies and an M.S. in Community and Regional Planning from the University of Texas at Austin.

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