

# Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership

<http://jel.sagepub.com/>

---

## Supporting the 7th-Year Undergraduate : Responsive Leadership at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

Penelope P. Espinoza and Crystal C. Espinoza

*Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* 2012 15: 32

DOI: 10.1177/1555458912440738

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jel.sagepub.com/content/15/1/32>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[University Council for Educational Administration](http://www.ucea.org)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://jel.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jel.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://jel.sagepub.com/content/15/1/32.refs.html>

>> **Version of Record** - Apr 24, 2012

Downloaded from [jel.sagepub.com](http://jel.sagepub.com) at RUTGERS UNIV on July 6, 2013

What is This?

# Supporting the 7th-Year Undergraduate: Responsive Leadership at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

Penelope P. Espinoza<sup>1</sup> and Crystal C. Espinoza<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Administrators at 4-year, public institutions of higher education commonly negotiate a balance between the oft-competing goals of access and excellence. This is heightened within minority–majority campuses, such as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), serving substantial numbers of first-generation degree seekers and low-income students. Administrators are obliged to support the needs of a “non-traditional” student body, while they are simultaneously and increasingly called to innovate and support efforts to leverage institutional prestige and ranking. This article describes the case of an associate dean who attempts to advise a 7th-year undergraduate. Drawing from the insights of the student’s tumultuous baccalaureate pathway, the contributions of a colleague advising students with similar challenges, as well as the demonstrated best practices of other HSIs, the administrator prepares recommendations for the institution’s strategic planning committee.

## Keywords

minority students; college retention; organizational change

## Introduction

More than half of all Hispanic/Latino(a) students in higher education are enrolled in a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI; Gastic & Nieto, 2010). HSIs are 2- and 4-year

---

<sup>1</sup>The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

<sup>2</sup>The University of Arizona, Tucson, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Penelope P. Espinoza, Educational Leadership and Foundations, The University of Texas at El Paso, 500 W. University Ave., Education Bldg., Rm. 910, El Paso, TX 79968-0727, USA

Email: ppespinoza@utep.edu

higher education institutions with a student body consisting of at least 25% Hispanic students and at least half of those students must qualify as low-income. The particular challenge that many HSI administrators face is how to build excellence and cultivate prestige, while also effectively responding to the needs of their unique student bodies. Aside from their racial minority status, students at HSIs are considered “non-traditional” because they are mostly commuters and part-time students (Benítez & DeAro, 2004; Santiago, 2007). In addition, HSIs serve substantial numbers of first-generation collegians and tend to have high enrollment of low-income students (Santiago, 2007). Also, as described in the following case narrative, HSI administrators grapple with the complexity of developing useful and appropriate indicators for rates of student success. A prime example is reconciling graduation rates: HSIs produce approximately 40% of all baccalaureate degrees attained by U.S. Hispanics, yet college graduation rates of Hispanics are persistently lower than any other ethnic group in the country (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010; Santiago, 2006, 2007). Likewise, HSI student retention rates are reportedly lower than those at predominately White institutions (PWIs), as measured by “traditional” standards (Benítez & DeAro, 2004; Laden, 2001).

The role of faculty, administrators, and the institution as a whole in contributing to the persistence of high-risk students has been understudied, but there is theory to inform such work, as “it is implicit in Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon’s (2004) revision of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) interactionalist model of student departure from college” (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011, p. 3). Tinto’s model, widely cited in literature on retention, posits that students’ academic and social and integration while in college influences their goal and institutional commitment, which affects persistence. Braxton et al.’s (2004) revision of the model included elaboration of the factors that influence *integration* (incorporation into institutional life) for students. Braxton et al. (2004) highlighted one specific factor as a significant influence on social integration: the institution’s commitment to student welfare as perceived by the students (Schreiner et al., 2011). This suggests that the institution must demonstrate to students a dedication to collaborating with them in attaining academic and social integration. Such a proactive role assists the students in fostering commitment to the educational process and to the institution in particular. Integration allows for the accumulation of *social capital*, which improves academic achievement and predicts persistence (Eaton & Bean, 1995; Strayhorn, 2010).

Social capital refers to networking resources that facilitate access to new opportunities (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010). In the context of higher education, social capital can be considered “college knowledge.” College knowledge is key to postsecondary academic success and broadly refers to a necessary skill set and savvy for navigating the social, economic, and academic challenges inherent to the baccalaureate journey (Burleson, Hallett, & Park, 2008; McDonough, 1994, 1997). For instance, college knowledge includes how to complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), select and register for classes, construct a degree plan, where to access math tutoring or help with study skills, and how to manage competing personal and academic priorities. Although research demonstrates that Hispanic

students hold high expectations for academic success in college (Cahalan, Ingels, Burns, Planty, & Daniel, 2006; Chen, Wu, Tasoff, & MPR Associates, 2010; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), they have lesser amounts of “college knowledge” compared with White students (Immerwahr, 2003; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

Less-often explored in the literature is how to provide responsive leadership for an increasingly diverse Latino(a) undergraduate population amid institutional change and expansion. How do HSI faculty and administrators focus on retaining students while meeting the demands of a university volleying for prestige? The present work challenges the reader to consider the immediate and long-term impact of strategic positioning on the leadership and mission of an open-access, minority–majority campus. How does institutional policy and practice impede or promote the accumulation of social capital among students?

Within the context of a HSI driven to become a Tier One research institution, this article presents the case of an associate dean, Dr. Colin Reid, who attempts to assist a 7th-year undergraduate on the brink of dropping out. Reid is deeply concerned that Jeffrey, like many others facing similar issues, will give up before attaining his degree.

## **Case Narrative**

For 2 years, Dr. Colin Reid has been an associate dean of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) at a 4-year public institution in the southwestern United States classified as a HSI. Reid is also an associate professor of history and focuses on labor and the U.S. working class. While Reid has authored books on the experiences of Irish-American immigrants in the early 19th century, he was drawn to teaching at this HSI, and delved into research on the people of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Expanding his research focus has been a rewarding journey, but Reid has found the most reward in working with the university’s student population. Raised in a small, upper-middle class, predominately White community in Wisconsin, Reid grew up around individuals, who like himself, had parents who graduated from college and often went to graduate school. Now, as associate dean, Reid feels a tangible sense of satisfaction in advising and helping to create policies and programs to support underrepresented students, whose paths to college were not as defined as his own.

## ***Institutional Context***

Last academic year, the university officially announced its aim to become a Tier One research institution by intensifying its focus on research and doctoral programs. The term *Tier One* is a nationally revered designation referring to the “very high research activity” classification formulated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Carnegie Foundation, 2011). Since the 1970s, the Carnegie Foundation has used a variety of empirical data to develop and apply “the leading framework for recognizing and describing institutional diversity in U.S. higher education” (Carnegie Foundation, 2011). In 2005, the Carnegie Foundation revised its classification framework

to include several categories of assessment, including Undergraduate and Graduate Instructional Program classifications, Enrollment Profile and Undergraduate Profile classifications, and Size and Setting classification. Yet, the “traditional Carnegie Classification Framework,” the “Basic Classification,” continues to be the predominant metric for assessing an institution’s research activity and relative prestige. Indeed, some state lawmakers have applied the Carnegie framework to gauge the progress of public universities, awarding funds to those demonstrating strides toward Tier One or “very high research activity” status.

Accordingly, the university president has assembled a group of administrators from across campus to form a Strategic Planning Committee. The overriding aim of this committee is to develop a tangible plan demonstrating how each academic and administrative unit can contribute to the Tier One goal. When Reid received an invitation to serve on a planning subcommittee, he was excited to be recognized in this way and looked forward to the leadership opportunity. Yet, when he began to consider what his contributions should be as an advisor of undergraduates, he was daunted. Immediately brought to mind were the stacks of files on Reid’s desk, representing students in his college enrolled beyond 6 years without completion of a degree. Those files also represent persistent problems the university has grappled with: a 42% undergraduate degree completion rate and an average time-to-degree rate of 6 years.

When Reid came to the university, he viewed it as a “niche institution” (Rhoades, 2007), reflecting and serving the people of this U.S.–Mexico border region. Of the approximately 20,000 undergraduates, 77% are from the immediate and neighboring regions and 74% are commuter students. Further mirroring the local community, 79% of students are Mexican American, 69% are from low-income households, and 65% of students are the first in their families to pursue college. The “branding” of the university as *the* premier postsecondary institution for this region’s aspiring Hispanic scholars is overwhelmingly apparent in the university’s website and commercials, the president’s speeches, and all of the brochures and recruitment materials Reid has seen. As an administrator, he has taken on a sense of pride for the institution’s meaningful connection to its local region. Reid pondered, “Is it possible to model ourselves after more prestigious universities while effectively serving our students?”

### *The Path of a 7-Year Undergraduate*

Reid prepares to meet for the second time with one student whose file sits on top of the stack on his desk. Jeffrey Benavidez is a Mexican American, first-generation college student from a low-income household. The first time they met, LSA had placed a hold on Jeffrey’s enrollment, in accordance with the university’s policy for 7th-year students until advised by a dean of their college. Reid worked with Jeffrey to complete an updated degree plan and other necessary paperwork to lift the hold on his enrollment. However, Jeffrey has requested to meet with Reid again because a separate hold was placed on his enrollment by the financial aid office, due to a lack of communication with LSA.

Jeffrey appeared in Reid's office, weary and despondent, "So, here I am again." Reid motioned for Jeffrey to take a seat, "This time, Jeffrey, I was hoping you could tell me more about what you believe has impeded your academic progress." After a few more words of interest and encouragement, Reid was able to get Jeffrey to recount his academic background.

Jeffrey began his undergraduate career in the shadow of an older sister who had attended a prestigious university on a combination of scholarships and financial aid, without financial assistance from their working-class parents. In contrast, and more typical of a first-generation degree seeker from a low-income background, Jeffrey's academic pathway has been difficult. He struggled, but persisted, through high school, graduating one semester late, but gaining admission to a HSI within a few hundred miles from his hometown. As Jeffrey endeavored to balance coursework, extracurricular activities, and a job to help finance his education, his grades suffered and he found himself on academic suspension. As a result, he reluctantly moved back home with his parents and enrolled at the local HSI.

Prompted by his parents to restart college as soon as possible, Jeffrey entered the university at the start of spring term. There was no formal orientation program for transfer students and no orientation program whatsoever in the spring. Jeffrey was introduced to the university in a 15-min meeting with an academic advisor primarily concerned with arranging for Jeffrey to take a standardized exam now required by the state for admission to public higher education institutions. Before Jeffrey was sent to the campus testing center, he also learned that virtually none of the credits he received at his prior institution were accepted by this institution.

Jeffrey once again struggled to balance coursework with a job and now with the onset of clinical depression. Although Jeffrey had essentially self-diagnosed himself by reading medical information, he hesitated to seek help partly because he did not know anyone personally in psychotherapy and partly due to the potential expense of treating his condition without health insurance. He was especially frustrated by his academic difficulties because he knew the importance of education. From observing his parents' financial challenges, he understood that his earning potential could depend on his educational advancement. Also, Jeffrey truly enjoyed thought-provoking material in his courses, but when he made time to study, he felt unfocused, unmotivated, and unsure of how to improve when he received poor grades.

He changed his major once and his minor twice. The department in which he initially declared his major underwent program and administrative changes to include a large bilingual component, which drew on the strengths of many students and faculty of the U.S.–Mexico border town. Yet, Jeffrey—like a growing number of third/plus-generation Mexican Americans—was not bilingual and had increasing difficulty finding nonbilingual courses for his major. Thus, Jeffrey changed his major and was assigned to a new academic advisor, who reviewed his degree program and course credits. He pointed out that Jeffrey had some redundant course credits, but had not yet taken other required courses. Why had Jeffrey not kept track of his progress toward his undergraduate degree? Jeffrey complained about the lack of clarity in the university's sparsely published information on course taking, but internally, he blamed himself for

his continued academic failings. "If my sister could do this, why can't I?" he often thought. Jeffrey's GPA was dropping with each semester, and he was notified by his college not only about the hold on his enrollment but also that he was in danger of academic suspension.

After a 7-year journey, Jeffrey was still distant from a degree, needing to complete an additional 2 years of requirements for his major and minor. "Looks like this college thing is not for me after all," Jeffrey said crestfallen, "besides, I'm too old to be living on a student's salary and I need to start helping my parents with their financial situation. I can't justify another couple years of wasted time." Reid sensed the emotion behind Jeffrey's words. "Jeffrey, I know you are disappointed, but please don't give up. You've overcome so many challenges, and 2 years really isn't that long," Reid said encouragingly. "Look, Professor Reid, I really appreciate your time and willingness to help, but this just didn't work out for me . . . and at least I gave it a try," Jeffrey stood and put out his hand to shake Reid's. "Jeffrey, I believe you can do this, and I'm going to do everything I can to support you. Let's set up some time to meet later this week," Reid pressed. Jeffrey shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm tired of failing at this game, and it's time I move on and find something else to do with my life."

### *Negotiating a Balanced Strategic Plan*

The meeting with Jeffrey was still on his mind when Reid attended the first strategic planning meeting later that afternoon. Reid served on the subcommittee for improving undergraduate education in conjunction with Tier One initiatives. Throughout the meeting, Reid observed that most of the discussion dealt with how to attract senior faculty with proven research and grant-seeking ability, and how to motivate existing faculty members to step up their research agendas and pursue extramural funding. Then, the discussion turned toward recruitment of the region's more competitive students who are likely to go onto graduate school, particularly PhD programs. Reid's thoughts turned again toward Jeffrey and the files on his desk, and he asked, "So what are we going to do about those 'less competitive' students who have nearly dropped off our radar?"

"If you are alluding to our graduation rates, we must keep in mind that the current national ranking systems, like U.S. News and World Report, do not count over half of our students," one of the committee members replied. "Their method for assessing graduation rates only accounts for full-time, first-time freshman who enroll in the fall. That excludes over half of our student body who are part-time, transfer, and returning students." Another member added,

When people look at our graduation rates, many just don't understand that we cannot be held to the same standards as selective institutions with 'traditional' students. We are a public, open-admissions HSI, and we belong to a group of institutions that produce almost half of all Hispanic baccalaureate degrees nationwide.



The room was silent until Reid responded,

To be sure, it is a complex issue, and I hear your points. We, like other HSIs across the country, are producing more Hispanic baccalaureates than PWIs. Is this simply by virtue of our comparatively high Hispanic enrollment? Or, is this a useful indicator for student or institutional success? I don't know. But, we cannot ignore this university's 42% retention rate nor dismiss it as an unavoidable reality of a nontraditional campus. This morning I met with a 7th-year undergraduate who has decided to drop out because he learned he's still 2 years shy of graduation. While he had personal challenges along the way, somewhere down that line we failed him. The support he needed was not there.

"I agree with Dr. Reid," Dr. Alicia Suarez, associate dean of the College of Engineering, said.

This fall, in the College of Engineering, we were proud to enroll a record 3,100 students. But, according to our retention record, I am sorry to say that we expect less than half of those undergraduates to complete their degrees, and I know the odds are about the same across campus. Many of our students are balancing full-time jobs and family along with their coursework, and certainly, those factors are reflected in our retention rates. But, shouldn't we assume some institutional responsibility for the substantial numbers of students who, for various unknown reasons, are not able to finish what they've started?

We only have a couple minutes before we adjourn this meeting, but I want to reemphasize that the focus of this subcommittee is to develop a plan that supports the university's efforts toward Tier One. The issues we discuss in these meetings must be viewed from that lens,

Provost Cynthia Rosen interjected.

Yet, retention, time-to-degree, and graduation rates remain serious challenges we have not overcome, and indeed, they must be part of any discussion on improving undergraduate education. As we develop our recommendations, I urge you to think about how we can achieve a balance between what we must do to secure the future advancement of this university, while also being responsive to the immediate and pressing needs of the students we serve. I'd like for us to begin by working in teams, and I will ask Drs. Suarez and Reid to focus on undergraduate support programs. Next time we meet, I'll look forward to your suggestions.

As Reid gathered his notebook and computer bag, he was stopped by a more senior associate dean from the College of Business. "Given what the VP for Academic



Affairs and Provost emphasized about state funds hinging on Tier One progress, do you think it's wise to prioritize the group of students we won't see walk across the stage?" he asked quietly and went on, "You're just at the start of your administrative career, Colin. Take it from me, use your time wisely—think about growing the university." Reid politely excused himself and walked over to Dr. Suarez exiting the conference room. He had spoken with Suarez at a couple of student union events, as well as at the university day care, where they each have children.

"I'm relieved we received some validation from the Provost, but I also feel like we've been reprimanded," Reid chuckled. "Well, you have to expect flack when pulling the tarp off the elephant in the room," Suarez smiled. "As I said, I really appreciated your comments, Colin, and I'm glad I wasn't the first to raise this concern." "Why is that?" Reid asked.

Some issues are given less credence when they are voiced by the academic from 'the hood.' It's well known that I'm from this community, and I know what it's like to struggle through college and be the first in your family to pursue a degree. Many times, I've felt my opinions are given less weight or simply dismissed as biased,

Suarez said. Reid grimaced and shook his head.

Well, I'm glad that didn't stop you from voicing your concerns today. Alicia, do you have time for a quick coffee to continue our discussion and schedule another time to meet? Also, if you wouldn't mind, I'd really appreciate your feedback on the 7th-year student I mentioned in the meeting. Discussing his case may be a good springboard for what we can present to the committee.

"Absolutely," Suarez replied.

I want to share with you some research briefs circulated by colleagues at the last HACU [Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities] conference. They offer a really comprehensive set of 'best practices' at HSIs across the country. I think we should draw upon those briefs as the basis for our recommendations.

### *Developing Student-Centered Strategic Planning*

After their brainstorming session, Reid returned to his office and read through the reports emailed to him by Dr. Suarez. He meditated on what worked at other HSIs and began listing the institutional efforts that Jeffrey may have benefitted from most: (a) consistent, personal academic advising; (b) greater transparency of degree requirements and progress; (c) programming to advance college knowledge; and (d) facilitated access to mental health resources.

Like 30% of his classmates, Jeffrey transferred from another institution, and most transferred from the local community college. With such a significant number of transfer students, Reid wondered why there is currently no orientation program in place for them. Reid made notes accordingly:

We should model a transfer student orientation program on the current one for freshmen. In response to the influx of transfer students throughout the academic year, orientation should be offered in fall, spring, and summer semesters. During this orientation, transfer students will become acquainted with the new online degree-tracking system, as well as basic information on paying tuition and registering. This programming will provide a road map for their baccalaureate journeys.

To address academic planning and advising, Reid considered how Jeffrey was consistently unsure about his total number of credits as well as the remaining required courses for his major and minor. Suarez had suggested empowering students via an online degree-monitoring tool making their baccalaureate pathways more transparent—for students as well as academic advisors. Accordingly, Reid jotted a few notes for presentation to the committee:

We need to amplify the visibility of a student's degree progress to the student herself and to key people in the university community. For a first-generation college student who may doubt the possibility of degree attainment when experiencing bumps on the journey, it will explicitly show the student what she has accomplished and where she is headed. The system will be responsive to any changes to the student's selected degree, automatically adjusting degree requirements if a different major or minor is entered. Furthermore, faculty and administrators should be able to easily access and share the same information on that student's progress. The system will allow students, faculty, and administrators to view approvals and notes regarding registration, tuition and financial aid, and related information.

With such a system, Jeffrey may not have encountered competing information about his enrollment status from two university offices that should have been working in unison.

Of course, Jeffrey needed more support than just an online system to attain his degree. Reid also considered the challenges that Suarez cited among her engineering undergraduates. Being the first in their families to attend college, Suarez observed that many students lack accurate expectations for the demands of college-level work, not only in terms of academics but also in terms of time management and financial planning. With this in mind, Reid drafted descriptions of seminars to offer as part of the freshmen and transfer orientation programs, as well as several workshops each semester via the Undergraduate Learning Center.

Because more than half of the university's students are first-generation collegians, Reid noted that the university should explore ways to bolster college knowledge at the family level. "Something *must* be working if Jeffrey's sister made it to Princeton," Reid thought. "But what factors made their college pathways so dissimilar?" Reid noted that the university should take a generational approach to fostering a college-going culture by developing meaningful ways of engaging family members (parents, siblings, etc.) in the orientation and experiences of first-generation undergraduates.

Finally, thinking about Jeffrey's battle with clinical depression, Reid proposed that staff from the University Health Center collaborate with the Undergraduate Learning Center to develop a presentation for freshmen and transfer students including information on the relationship between mental health and academic success, particularly to dispel misconceptions regarding counseling and psychological services. In Jeffrey's case, there were a number of reasons why he had not sought help. For one, Jeffrey is uninsured and assumed he would not be able to pay for counseling services on campus. When Reid informed him that those services are free and available to all part-time or full-time registered students, Jeffrey remained hesitant. He had never sought counseling and was intimidated by the thought of walking into the University Health Center.

Accordingly, Reid drafted,

We must make certain that all students are aware of the mental health services available to them. Students should not be deterred from seeking assistance because they believe they cannot pay for the help they need. Via the freshmen and transfer orientation, the Counseling Center's website, and other channels, we should do a better job of providing information on the kinds of mental health services provided, especially the peer support groups. We must do all that we can to encourage our students to seek help when they need it, especially since Latinos are among those groups less likely to access mental health services.

Drawing again from the best-practices reports, Reid made some final notes and emailed the first draft of his proposal to Suarez for feedback. Working backward and examining Jeffrey's case in retrospect was much easier than attempting to fix in 1 day what went wrong over a 7-year stretch.

## Teaching Notes

### *Case Summary*

Within the context of a HSI striving to become a Tier One research institution, this article presented the case of an associate dean who attempts to advise a 7th-year undergraduate. Jeffrey Benavidez is a third-generation Mexican American, first-generation college student from a low-income household. Over the tumultuous course of his undergraduate career, Jeffrey has transferred from one HSI to another, been on

academic suspension, worked while taking classes, commuted to campus, changed his major, and battled clinical depression. Dr. Colin Reed is motivated to act in response to Jeffrey's story, as it exemplifies the course of too many students in his college. In his efforts to prioritize the issue of student retention at a committee meeting on Tier One strategic planning, Reid finds support from a colleague. He prepares to propose a set of initiatives aimed at improved advising and support programming for first-generation degree seekers.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

There is a history of research that provides empirical support for the theoretical premise that students persist when they feel integrated into the academic and social communities of the institution (see Eaton & Bean, 1995, for a discussion including Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). However, more current research has outlined in rich detail the obstacles to academic and social engagement for minority students and males in particular (e.g., theory-driven work by Strayhorn, 2010, on the experiences of African American males and Latinos). Yet, there is also theoretical and empirical work to suggest that gaps in engagement and social capital for minority and first-generation college students can be mitigated by strategic interventions that address academic, financial, social, and psychological challenges—along the lines of those proposed in the case study (Braxton et al., 2004; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009).

Perhaps where more theoretical and empirical progress needs to be made is in the consideration of within-group differences among nontraditional college students. Existing critiques of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theories tend to focus on ethnic or socioeconomic differences between groups (e.g., Rendón, 1994; Strayhorn, 2010; Tierney, 1999), but offer less attention to issues of heterogeneity within a given social group. Scholarship is needed to address the efficacy of retention strategies *within* groups. For example, solely among Mexican Americans, persistence factors may differ by gender, socioeconomic status, generational status, mental health status, and other characteristics, just to name a few. The teaching strategies below elaborate on this point.

Echoing the introductory comments on the complicating issue of institutional change, scholarship is also needed to reframe the institution's responsibility for student engagement within the landscape of academic rankings and competition for research funds. This is a timely issue, as faculty and administrators at minority-serving institutions nationwide discuss the demands of access and accountability.

### *Teaching Strategies*

The teaching notes are intended to provide discussion points surrounding some of the main topics described in the case study by presenting a summary of current research

followed by questions to initiate group discussion. The intricacy of the case study allows for exploration of issues even beyond the six points of discussion presented here. For instance, conversations may develop regarding the role of Latino(a) faculty in retaining students at HSIs, administrative decision making at 2-year versus 4-year minority-serving institutions, and psychological and sociological approaches to persistence, as well as other topics. Thus, the points offered and the research cited is by no means comprehensive. Readers are urged to supplement the cited literature with the following comprehensive works on supporting diverse student bodies, among others:

Delgado-Romero, E. A., Flores, L., Gloria, A., Arredondo, P., & Castellanos, J. (2003). Developmental career challenges for Latino and Latina psychology faculty. In L. Jones & J. Castellanos (Eds.), *The majority in the minority: Retaining Latina/o faculty, administrators, and students in the 21st century* (pp. 257-283). Sterling, VA: Stylus Books.

Gasman, M., Baez, B., & Turner, C. (Eds.). (2008). *Interdisciplinary approaches to understanding minority-serving institutions*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Gonzalez, C. (2007). Building sustainable power Latino scholars and academic leadership positions at U.S. institutions of higher learning. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 6(2), 157-162.

Harper, S. R., & Harris, F., III. (Eds.). (2010). *College men and masculinities: Theory, research, and implications for practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Santiago, D. A. (2008). *Modeling Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): Campus practices that work for Latino students*. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edexcelencia.org/research/hsi/default.asp>

- 1. Point of Discussion:** Reid reflected on Jeffrey's sorely inconsistent experiences with academic advisers, which did little to demystify a solid path toward graduation. Reid wondered if it is possible for a large, public university to provide the kind of personalized, step-by-step mapping of degree plans he experienced at a small, liberal arts college. What would that look like at a HSI? How does this relate to the concept of academic integration?

Scholarly work on issues of retention and degree attainment among Hispanics/Latino(a)s have offered a common suggestion: to advise and lead students in a more hands-on, even "intrusive" manner. In research by Perrakis and Hagedorn (2010), faculty and administrators at a HSI were interviewed regarding efforts to improve student success. One faculty member stated, "I think we need to provide more 'hand-holding' to our Hispanic students. The current culture of letting them navigate the system on their own does not work for our students" (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010, p. 807). Research by Tovar and Simon (2006) showed that although Latinos were disproportionately represented in the percentage of students on academic probation at an ethnically diverse community college, they were also more likely than other groups to voluntarily participate in a pilot "reorientation" program. Also, although Latino(a)

students were more likely than other students in the program to anticipate future academic challenges and contemplate leaving college, they reported high degrees of receptivity to institutional assistance in the form of academic tutoring, financial guidance, and opportunities for social enrichment. Latino(a) students also held the most favorable attitudes toward educators, which suggested they may be particularly likely to accept a “more intrusive advisement process,” which has shown to be effective in other studies of probationary students (Tovar & Simon, 2006, p. 559). Torres (2006) tested a social-cognitive retention model for Latino(a) collegians that suggested students can better maneuver the college system when they create a cognitive map that includes positive symbols, self-reflection, self-regulations, and forethought. However, students should not be expected to develop this cognitive map independently; rather, they must receive direct assistance, even to the extent that “institutions need to see themselves as cocreators of students’ cognitive maps. To be effective in helping students succeed, colleges cannot assume students will know how to succeed in college” (Torres, 2006, p. 316).

**Discussion questions:** What concerns, if any, exist in taking the perspective that Hispanic/Latino(a) students would benefit from more *intrusive, hands-on* advising? Is this “hands-on” strategy an example of responsive student support services tailored for particular student populations? Or, is this an approach that de-values the existing social capital among Hispanic students? Consider the forms of social capital Jeffrey possessed, as well as how those resources may have been leveraged by the institution.

- 2. Point of Discussion:** During the strategic planning meeting, committee members attributed the university’s low retention and graduation rates to factors characteristic of nontraditional students, such as balancing work and family responsibilities with part-time enrollment. Drs. Reid and Suarez pushed their colleagues to consider the institution’s role.

In an overview of retention practices, Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2009) reinforced the institution’s role in undergraduate retention. The authors identified the distinction made in other higher education literature that “persistence can be framed as the outcome of individual student behavior, whereas retention is the outcome of institutional efforts and action” (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009, p. 27). For instance, one model of ethnic minority student retention focuses not on individual behavior, but on institutional services and practices, more specifically the relationships among financial aid, recruitment and admissions, academic services, curriculum and instruction, and student services (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003, as cited in Oseguera et al., 2009). The institution can improve retention by identifying students on enrollment who may experience academic or personal challenges, and provide them with early and intensive interventions (Seidman, 2005, as cited in Oseguera et al., 2009). Policies and programs that demonstrate institutional responsibility for retention include 1st-year seminars, expanded orientation programs, sustained mentoring programs, bridge

programs, a transfer curriculum, and learning communities for transfer cohorts (Oseguera et al., 2009). Thus, educational leaders are cautioned against localizing problems of retention within the individual student—particularly first-generation, nontraditional, and Latino(a) students:

Instead of deeming students' cultural backgrounds or individual characteristics obstacles that prevent them from achieving educational success and releasing the educational system from responsibility . . . put the onus back on institutions to create responsive environments that better reflect the needs of a increasingly diverse student body. (Oseguera et al., 2009, p. 41)

**Discussion questions:** How do you reconcile individual students' academic behaviors and circumstances with institutional efforts on retention? To what extent should we attribute academic success or failure to the complex, multidimensional lives of individual students? Are there instances where the institution is not at all accountable for the academic difficulties of its students?

**3. Point of Discussion:** While Jeffrey's older sister succeeded academically and graduated from Princeton, Jeffrey's difficult path was more typical of low-income, Latino, first-generation degree seekers. He often wondered, "If she could do it, why can't I?" Likewise, when Reid was drafting recommendations for the committee, he also pondered why Jeffrey and his sister had such starkly disparate experiences. Gender was among the potential factors that came to mind.

Current statistics show that women are attending college and receiving undergraduate degrees at higher rates than men, and that this is also the case within the Mexican American community (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Thus, attention has turned to potential factors responsible for this trend and whether the needs of male students (and ethnic minority males in particular) have been overlooked or perhaps are not well understood. As Davis and Laker (2004) pointed out, college men are lagging in participation and persistence, but outnumber college women in rates of risky drinking behaviors, as victims of violence (apart from sexual assault), and suicide. The authors argued,

It may be tempting to hold men themselves responsible for not connecting to our academic and student affairs programs and services, but . . . it is a professional mandate to provide opportunities that incorporate an understanding of men's development. (Davis & Laker, 2004, p. 48)

As this gender gap in higher education continues, education researchers will seek to better understand it by exploring how gender and ethnic identities are at once shaped by educational settings and impact educational experiences. Meanwhile, higher



education administrators must consider whether programs and services aimed at increasing degree attainment among Hispanics/Latino(a)s should be developed and delivered in gender-specific ways.

**Discussion questions:** In developing responsive student support services, what does it mean to cater to a student's gender in higher education? To what extent is our knowledge about gender differences in educational contexts limited to stereotypes? Does research and praxis regarding gender at PWIs apply to HSIs?

- 4. Point of Discussion:** Reid conceptualizes his university as a “niche institution,” specializing in serving a particular type of student. He, like many other higher education administrators and policy makers, commonly view the student bodies of HSIs and other minority–majority institutions as generally homogeneous.

An issue related to gender differences is how well strategies to promote participation in higher education for Hispanic/Latino(a) students account for the increasing diversity even within only the Mexican American community. Although the largest Latino subgroup, Mexican Americans make up a smaller percentage of college graduates relative to other subgroups including Puerto Rican Americans and Cuban Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This means that often those Mexican American students who are pursuing a college degree have many challenges in common: being among the first in their families to attend college, having fewer financial resources for college, commuting to campus, transferring between 2-year and 4-year institutions, just to name a few. However, the apparent homogeneity of this group should not mask the within-group differences accelerating with time and growth of the population. Differences exist and are increasing among Mexican American students in terms of their knowledge and use of Spanish, familiarity and observance of Mexican cultural traditions, ties to relatives and friends across the U.S.–Mexico border, and other preferences, attitudes, and associations.

**Discussion questions:** In developing programs and services for Hispanic/Latino(a) students, how might higher education administrators account for diverse preferences and inclinations within this student population? Within the context of state budget cuts and limited resources, is it more feasible or productive to focus on the common threads?

- 5. Point of Discussion:** Jeffrey confides in Reid that clinical depression is among the factors that have impeded his academic progress. Yet, Jeffrey is unfamiliar with the mental health services on campus and has never used let alone visited the university counseling center.

There is a history of research indicating underutilization of mental health services by people of color. Across a variety of studies, a trend toward underutilization appears when ethnic minority groups are compared with a White sample (Sullivan,

Ramos-Sanchez, & McIver, 2007). Research has sought to identify the reasons for underutilization, including fear of stigma, institutional barriers, and cultural conflicts with treatment approaches (Sullivan et al., 2007).

Among Hispanics/Latino(a)s, some differences in utilization of mental health services appear to be based on factors such as generational status and gender, but findings often appear mixed. For instance, some research shows that while recent immigrants are least likely to seek services, second-generation students experience greater problem severity, perhaps due to cultural distance between themselves and their parents (Sullivan et al., 2007). Regarding gender differences, one study involving Hispanic/Latino(a) university students showed that gender did not predict use of services, yet much research suggests that in general, women are more likely than men to use campus counseling services (Sullivan et al., 2007).

To add further complexity, recent research suggests that Hispanic/Latino(a) students may experience a continual low-level state of anxiety, worry, and sadness that does not meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis (Del Pilar, 2009). Students experiencing these subtle but persistent symptoms may feel that mental health counseling is unnecessary, and those interacting with the student may view the symptoms as minor. Yet, this type of subclinical syndrome (*forme fruste* or *shadow syndrome*, as termed by Ratey & Johnson, 1995, cited in Del Pilar, 2009) may prevent students from fully engaging in academic work and, in the presence of an unexpected stressor, may cause greater upset leading toward academic failure. Although more research is needed to better understand this low-level psychological distress, university counseling centers should preemptively assess these symptoms among freshmen and students on academic probation. Early treatment of these symptoms may circumvent the onset of clinical depression or other major psychological disorders (Del Pilar, 2009).

**Discussion questions:** Given the variety of factors that influence the use of mental health services by Hispanic/Latino(a) students, how can higher education administrators appropriately reach out to students who may be in need of counseling to attain academic success? On an institutional level, what can be done to bring to light and develop programming around the critical connection between mental health and academic performance?

- 6. Point of Discussion:** Drs. Reid and Suarez are charged with developing a proposal to improve undergraduate education, in support of the university's larger Tier One aspirations. After brainstorming with Dr. Suarez and digesting reports on "best practices," Reid makes a list of initiatives to address the multiple challenges faced by students like Jeffrey. At the next strategic planning meeting, Reid and Suarez intend to present this outline for improved retention.

When considering how to improve persistence and retention rates, Hossler (2005) posited that the first inclination of campus administrators is to enthusiastically make a "laundry list" of various student support programs based on "best practices." However, in his review of the existing retention literature, Hossler found that there is

a shortage of published empirical studies on retention. Accordingly, Reid, like many campus administrators, neglected to include an evaluation component in his proposal. Neither did he propose an exploratory study to assess campus needs.

**Discussion questions:** Why do you think there is a paucity of published retention research? What is the importance of evaluation and exploratory study, and why are these components of institutional planning commonly disregarded or forgotten? How would you design an exploratory study and evaluation program for responsive student retention initiatives at this university?

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

- Benítez, M., & DeAro, J. (2004). Realizing student success at Hispanic-serving institutions. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 127, 35-48.
- Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2004). Understanding and reducing college student departure. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 30(3). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Burleson, D. A., Hallett, R. E., & Park, D. K. (2008). College knowledge. *College & University*, 84(2), 10-17.
- Cahalan, M. W., Ingels, S. J., Burns, L. J., Planty, M., & Daniel, B. (2006). *United States high school sophomores: A twenty-two year comparison, 1980-2002*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (2011). *The carnegie classification of institutions of higher education: About the carnegie classifications*. Retrieved from <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/>
- Chen, X., Wu, J., Tasoff, S., & MPR Associates, I. (2010). *Postsecondary expectations and plans for the high school senior class of 2003-04*. (NCES 2010-170rev). Washington, DC: Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010170rev.pdf>
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Suppl.), 95-120.
- Davis, T., & Laker, J. A. (2004). Connecting men to academic and student affairs programs and services. *New Directions for Student Services*, 140, 47-57.
- Del Pilar, J. A. (2009). Mental health and Latino/a college students: A psychological perspective and new findings. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8, 263-281. doi:10.1177/1538192708328891
- Eaton, S. B., & Bean, J. P. (1995). An approach/avoidance behavioral model of college student attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, 36, 617-645.

- Gastic, B., & Nieto, D. G. (2010). Latinos' economic recovery: Postsecondary participation and Hispanic-serving institutions. *Community College Research and Practice*, 34, 833-838.
- Hossler, D. (2005). Managing student retention: Is the glass half full or half empty, or simply empty? *College & University Journal*, 81(2), 11-14.
- Immerwahr, J. (2003). *With diploma in hand: Hispanic high school seniors talk about their future*. (National Center Report #03-2). San Jose, CA: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda.
- Laden, B. V. (2001). Hispanic-serving institutions: Myths and realities. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76, 73-92.
- Martinez, J. A., Sher, K. J., Krull, J. L., & Wood, P. K. (2009). Blue collar scholars? Mediators and moderators of university attrition in first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50, 87-103. doi:10.1353/csd.0.0053
- McDonough, P. (1994). Buying and selling higher education: The social construction of the college applicant. *Journal of Higher Education*, 65(4), 18-33.
- McDonough, P. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Noeth, R. J., & Wimberly, G. L. (2002). *Creating seamless educational transitions for urban African American and Hispanic students*. ACT Policy Report.
- Oseguera, L., Locks, A. M., & Vega, I. I. (2009). Increasing Latino/a students' baccalaureate attainment: A focus on retention. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8, 23-53. doi:10.1177/1538192708326997
- Pascarella, E. T., & Chapman, D. W. (1983). A multiinstitutional, path analytic validation of Tinto's model of college withdrawal. *American Educational Research Journal*, 20(1), 87-102.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1983). Predicting voluntary freshman year retention/withdrawal behavior in a residential university: A path analytic validation of Tinto's model. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75(2), 215-226.
- Perrakis, A., & Hagedorn, L. S. (2010). Latino/a student success in community colleges and Hispanic-serving institution status. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 34, 797-813. doi:10.1080/10668921003723110
- Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19, 23-32.
- Rhoades, G. (2007). Distinctive choices in intersecting markets: Seeking strategic niches. In R. L. Geiger, C. L. Colbeck, R. L. Williams, & C. K. Anderson (Eds.), *Future of the American public research university*. (pp. 121-143). Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers.
- Santiago, D. A. (2006). *Inventing Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): The basics*. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education. Retrieved from [www.edexcelencia.org/research/pubs.asp](http://www.edexcelencia.org/research/pubs.asp)
- Santiago, D. A. (2007). *Choosing Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): A closer look at Latino students' college choices*. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education. Retrieved from [www.edexcelencia.org/research/pubs.asp](http://www.edexcelencia.org/research/pubs.asp)
- Schreiner, L. A., Noel, P., Anderson, E. C., & Cantwell, L. (2011). The impact of faculty and staff on high-risk college student persistence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52, 322-339.

- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 1-40.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2010). When race and gender collide: Social and cultural capital's influence on the academic achievement of African American and Latino males. *The Review of Higher Education*, 33, 307-332. doi:10.1353/rhe.0.0147
- Sullivan, K. T., Ramos-Sanchez, L., & McIver, S. D. (2007). Predicting the use of campus counseling services for Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic, and White students: Problem severity, gender, and generational status. *Journal of College Counseling*, 10, 103-116.
- Terenzini, P. T., & Pascarella, E. T. (1980). Towards the validation of Tinto's model of college student attrition: A review of recent studies. *Research in Higher Education*, 12(3), 271-282.
- Tierney, W. G. (1999). Models of minority college-going and retention: Cultural integrity versus cultural suicide. *Journal of Negro Education*, 68, 80-91.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tornatzky, L. G., Cutler, R., & Lee, J. (2002). *College knowledge: What Latino parents need to know and why they don't know it*. Claremont, CA: The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute.
- Torres, V. (2006). A mixed method study testing data-model fit of a retention model for Latino/a students at urban universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47, 299-318. doi:10.1353/csd.2006.0037
- Tovar, E., & Simon, M. A. (2006). Academic probation as a dangerous opportunity: Factors influencing diverse college students' success. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30, 547-564. doi:10.1080/10668920500208237
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *Statistical abstract of the United States, Section 4: Education*. Retrieved from [http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab2006\\_2010.html](http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab2006_2010.html)

## Bios

**Penelope P. Espinoza** is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her areas of interest include issues of equity, access, and retention in higher education, and social psychology in education.

**Crystal C. Espinoza** is a PhD candidate in the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona. Her areas of interest involve access to postsecondary education among Latino/a and other underrepresented minority students, as well as the application of critical theory for understanding pervasive inequities and institutional racism in U.S. higher education.