

Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act:
Consumer Information and College Choice

Submitted by Deborah A. Santiago
Chief Operating Officer and Vice President for Policy
Excelencia in Education

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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and HELP Committee members, thank you for the invitation to participate in this hearing to discuss information for students and parents and the potential to better inform college choice. Everyone in the U.S. deserves a shot at the American Dream. The American Dream is the nation's ideal where everyone has the opportunity for success and upward social mobility through hard work in a society with few barriers. Today, a college education is increasingly required for success and upward social mobility, but educational attainment has not been reached equally by all and barriers continue to exist.

I am Deborah Santiago, chief operating officer and vice president for policy at *Excelencia* in Education (*Excelencia*). *Excelencia* in Education accelerates Latino student success in higher education by promoting Latino student achievement, conducting analysis to inform educational policies, and advancing institutional practices while collaborating with those committed and ready to meet our nation's goal of improving educational success. Launched in 2004 in Washington DC, *Excelencia* is building a network of results-oriented educators and policymakers to address the U.S. economy's need for a highly educated workforce and engaged civic leadership.

While some believe a focus on race and ethnicity *divides* us as a society, *Excelencia* in Education believes acknowledging racial and ethnic trends *describes* our society, and therefore, helps us understand it. This does not exclude other groups in society. Our purpose is to consider seemingly inflexible issues in postsecondary education with a more contemporary lens. This lens provides a fresh perspective to consider redesigning consumer information and data using this young and growing population as the baseline, rather than the footnote, from which to develop more effective policies, engage diverse stakeholders, and enhance active tactical responses necessary to better serve a majority of students, not just Latinos. *Excelencia* starts our discussions about postsecondary education with a consideration of the Latino population, because, despite our long-standing existence and growth in the U.S., too often Latinos are not considered at all, or are an afterthought in education issues. And we cannot reach our national goals of an educated citizenry and workforce without a tactical plan that includes Latinos.

So now you have a sense of the lens from which *Excelencia* has formed our perspective on information for students and families and their college choices. One final point that informs my lens: I am a person of privilege who has benefited from the American Dream. I am privileged because I have a college education. Less than one in two adults in the nation, and less than one in four Latino adults in the nation, have earned an associate degree or higher. And I was raised to believe with privilege comes responsibility to give back to others who do not have the same privileges. While I had emotional and financial support from my parents, it was my responsibility to figure out how to apply, enroll and pay for college. I was lucky. I went to college in a traditional pathway (straight from high school to college, lived on campus, and finished in four years). But this traditional pathway is no longer the prevalent pathway for the majority of students today. These experiences and knowledge inform the work to help our current and future students also become people of privilege.

Information for students and families

Having accurate and useful information is critical to student and family choices for college access and success. However, three current realities are challenging the increased efforts at the

federal level to provide useful information to a diverse polis of potential college-goers: 1) limited awareness of how to reach the growing representation of Latinos and other “post-traditional” students ready to access college; 2) the resistance to change of institutional structures designed for “traditional” students; and, 3) the constant fluctuations of factors informing choice, such as institutional selectivity, costs, financial aid, and workforce opportunities.

Limited awareness of post-traditional students

Sharing broad profiles of students to guide public policy obviously muddles the individual profile or experience, but is a necessary tool to work at scale. The traditional student profile currently drives so much of the information shared about college today. However, this profile represents less than 20 percent of students enrolled in college today, and their representation is shrinking. In fact, the majority of college-going, and potentially college-going students are “post-traditional.” Whereas the term “nontraditional” is often used to describe students that do not fit into a traditional profile, the term “post-traditional” better describes the growing majority of students of today. We are not returning to a student majority that fits the traditional profile entirely. Post-traditional students include part-time, returning, veteran, commuting, adult, Latino and other traditionally underrepresented students. They are the majority of students today. Consider the contrast between the traditional and post-traditional student profiles.

Traditional student profile	Post-traditional student profile
College-ready	May need academic prep or remediation
Enroll in a college or university full-time	Enroll at a community college and part-time
Enroll the fall after high school graduation	Delay initial postsecondary enrollment while entering the workforce
Live on-campus	Live off-campus with their parents or with their own dependants
Complete a bachelor degree in four years	Take more than four years to complete a degree
Parents have college degree	First in family to enroll
White, non-Hispanic	Latino or African American
Do not work while enrolled	Many work 30 hours or more a week
Make college choices based on financial aid, academic programs offered, & institutional prestige	Make college choices based on cost of attendance, location, & accessibility

The post-traditional student profile offers a contemporary lens to more accurately see America’s student population from which policymakers can develop more effective policies, engage diverse stakeholders, and enhance tactical responses to better inform and serve a growing majority of students in postsecondary education today and in the future.

Information needs of post-traditional students and families

Considering the information needs of this diverse set of post-traditional students complicates an already challenging goal to ensure public access to purposeful and consumer friendly information that enables students and families to select colleges or universities that best fits their needs. A growing body of research as well as work at *Excelencia* with communities and institutional leaders across the nation has led us to summarize the following about the information needs of many post-traditional students and families.

Post-traditional college-goers make pragmatic college choices

About half of all Latino undergraduates were the first in their family to enroll in postsecondary education. This is not surprising, since only seven percent of Latino adults had an associate degree, and only 14 percent had a bachelor degree or higher in 2012. While Latinos are more likely to be the first in their family to enroll in college than other racial/ethnic groups, this is not unique to Latinos. Given that only 41 percent of all adults in the U.S. have an associate degree or higher, the children from the majority of adults in the country are potential first-generation college-goers. This group characteristic highlights a critical opportunity in public policy to design and deliver information about college options that increases the access and success of first-generation college-goers.

Conventional wisdom is that students prioritize financial aid, institutional prestige, and academic programs as critical factors influencing their college choice. However, many Latino and other post-traditional students prioritized college costs, proximity to where they lived, and an accessible campus as decisive factors in their college choice. In fact, increasingly post-traditional students are choosing their institution based on the “sticker price” of tuition and related costs, without significantly factoring in financial aid. They also appear to be increasingly adapting to rising college costs by choosing to enroll at less expensive institutions, enroll part-time, occasionally stop out and return, and work while enrolled.

Recent national discussions that point to high-achieving, low-income and first-generation students undermatching in their college choices miss a broader understanding of the factors that inform choice and applies a conventional understanding of a “best fit” college for a student. Speaking with students and asking why they chose their institution may yield a better understanding of the students’ choices. In focus groups with low-income and first-generation college-goers, students repeatedly told us they believed they could get a quality education anywhere, if they were motivated, so why would they go elsewhere or pay more? Many of these post-traditional students are making their own “tradeoffs” in deciding what a “best fit” college choice is for them that accommodates their economic needs, family responsibility and goals for completion with institutional flexibility, cost, and convenience. This is a pragmatic and self-determining perspective, and should be respected. However, those of us who study postsecondary education know the diversity of college options and opportunities available vary between institutions. If all colleges are not “equal,” what additional information should post-traditional students factor in to their choices? And how do they integrate or compare this additional information with what they have already prioritized as informing their choice?

Understanding the pragmatism that guides the college choices of many post-traditional students and knowing the prevailing conventional wisdom of what students and families need to know to

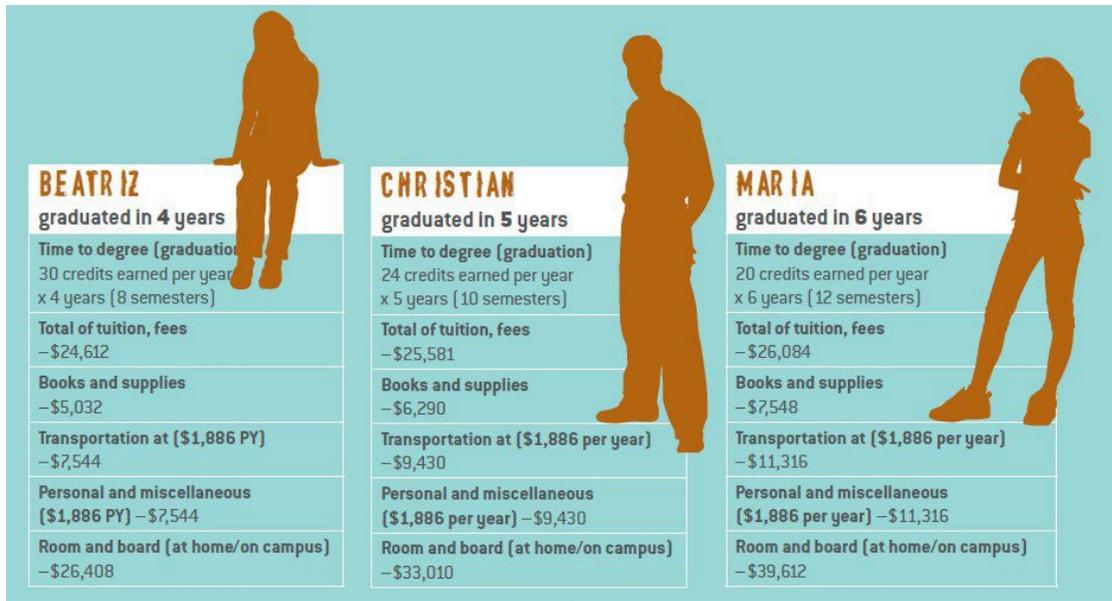
make their college choices can improve the crosswalk between what students want to know and should know to find the “best fit” in their college choices.

Targeted and appropriate information can improve college choices

College choices are both influenced and constrained by educational expectations, knowledge of options, financial resources available, and the quality of academic preparation in high school. Studies have shown that Latinos are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to value higher education, but have lower educational aspirations than other groups. It is hard to refute that strategic outreach and engagement could improve the actualization of college aspirations. Those who know the system, know there are resources and support structures available, even if in disparate locations and systems. Often, post-traditional students and families have limited knowledge about their college options and do not know how to navigate the college-going process without assertive institutional guidance. Today’s information assumes a depth of knowledge about the system of postsecondary educational options and costs that is out of synch with the data. Too often, policymakers assume the “kitchen table” conversation of postsecondary education options routinely takes place. However, many post-traditional students do not have perfect information to inform their college choices.

There have been recent efforts by the federal government to increase the amount and transparency of information to select and pay for college. This includes the net price calculator and the “shopping sheet.” The information found on these forms is useful, but one must consider how those tools are disseminated, and who uses them to make their college choices. Without intentional outreach and engagement of diverse communities that reaches those with the most need for information, these tools will not meet their intended purpose. And there is broad awareness that this conventional information is easy to find, much less compare between institutions.

Deployment of what is known about effective outreach and culturally competent strategies should be the norm rather than the exception when providing access for college options. While many students resort to the internet to find information about college options, the volume, quality, and ease of location for this information are often disjointed and complex. Other students rely on the information and experiences of other students and community members, and this can also lead to gathering dated, incorrect, or misleading information as often as accurate and useful information. Often post-traditional students have to navigate the complex and extensive options of college choices without their parents, and while counselors of trust are invaluable for post-traditional students, without strategic outreach and engagement, post-traditional students may not be aware of this resource option or these counselors may not be available to them. The figure below provides an example of simple information about college-going, attendance intensity, and associated costs to inform students in a user-friendly way of their options developed by the University of Texas-Brownsville and Texas Southmost College. It mimics the basic overall costs and time to degree that can inform an individual education plan. The simple information also makes clear the tradeoffs for students in a side-by-side manner so that they can make a more informed decision that fits their needs but also makes them aware of the cost and time to degree for each choice.



Source: The University of Texas, Brownsville (2012)¹

Too much information can limit college choices

An abundance of information about college options does not necessarily improve the chances of post-traditional students finding their “best fit” college. With more than 4,000 degree-granting institutions in the nation, each with their own enrollment criteria, cost, course offerings, support services, mascots, and colors, comparing and contrasting all of these institutions is beyond the scope of most students and families (and even most experienced college counselors) who are concurrently juggling many other priorities.

In this day and age, sophisticated search engines have been developed to simultaneously inform and guide consumer choices based on initial inputs and basic preferences. Take for example, Google, with its complex algorithms that rank material by what is most likely linked to an inquiry, or Amazon and Netflix and their sophisticated calculation based on previous views or recommendations. Help in narrowing options can facilitate the navigation of too much information so that potential students with limited time to become college experts can glean sufficient knowledge based on their interests that they can still find a “best fit” college.

Is there a federal role here in limiting college choice by helping to guide a student to narrow choices among viable and appropriate options? As the main source of data on all colleges in the nation, and with this information provided by colleges, incentivizing the creation of a public structure that does not rank or rate colleges, but that allows a student to provide inputs to interface with a more robust dataset (behind the curtain) by an independent entity may be of great value to post-traditional students.

Providing information early and often can influence college choices

Providing useful information about college options early and often in an educational pathway creates awareness and knowledge among students and their families that can help them prepare for their access and success. For example, in work *Excelencia* completed with partners in

California, the idea of offering information about paying and preparing for college at maternity wards for every new born developed. The California State University system offered a poster with a college roadmap from 3rd grade to the college gates with academic criteria to meet at each grade. The information was to be provided in the current packet of information provided to all new mothers about important parenting issues, such as their instructions to complete social security cards for their newborn and vaccination needs. Since one out of every two births in California was to a Latina, we knew many Latinos would get information they could use to become better informed and build their educational pathway to college early. In that same vein, K-12 schools are building college-going cultures on their campuses, and community-based organizations are engaged in education strategies to provide information to prepare potential students with a roadmap to enroll in college so that their expectations and costs for persistence and completion are clear.

Identifying post-traditional students is needed to design tailored information and outreach.

While the federal government does collect large amounts of data, this data is not often used in a manner that informs the targeted awareness and outreach that can facilitate information sharing on college options and choices. Disaggregating data by the very characteristics that define post-traditional students can improve the targeted and intentional strategies by federal, state, institutional, and community programs to reach these students. If paired with effective outreach, this information can further inform the impact of those strategies for effectiveness. And once constructive way to offer this data support to inform policy and practice is to link existing data through efforts such as a student unit record system that follows the progress of students and allows for timely interventions by institutions or other privileged providers. This does not imply a relaxation of student privacy, but rather an alignment of disparate data systems in a manner that can facilitate targeting of appropriate research and targeting of better information and options to post-traditional students.

Summary and recommendations

This short testimony offers some insights into the post-traditional students and families we have been privileged to work with over many years. While the examples and ideas do not delve into the greater complexity of information, I hope it helps to frame a more robust discussion about who these students are and the choices they make to get access and attain the American Dream of a college education and social mobility.

Supporting access to postsecondary education remains essential for federal policy, and the federal role in helping to incentivize the development and dissemination of good information that can inform the college choices of current and future students is real. However, for the post-traditional student, access is not sufficient to guarantee completion. Too often we think getting students in to college is the biggest challenge. There is a Spanish saying reminiscent of this “access-only” approach to postsecondary education: “*Vayan con Dios,*” meaning, “Go with God” or more loosely explained, it may take divine intervention to facilitate your journey. Information that can guide college choice as well as the resources and strategies to persist to completion go hand in hand. The following is a summary of the perspectives and recommendations raised in this testimony.

Low-income and potentially first-generation college-goers make pragmatic college choices. Whereas conventional wisdom asserts students make college choices based on financial aid,

institutional prestige, and academic programs offered, more contemporary research has found post-traditional students are increasingly making college choices based on college costs, institutional accessibility, and location. Understanding these distinctions can improve the crosswalk between what students want to know and should know to find the “best fit” in their college choices.

Transparency of targeted and appropriate information on postsecondary education requires strategic outreach and engagement for maximum effectiveness. Detailed information has limited benefit if it does not reach those with the most need for it through intentional outreach and engagement of diverse communities. Implementing government outreach strategies that partner with organizations who are already aware and able to serve the information needs of post-traditional students can better support the college choices students make to find their “best fit” college option.

An abundance of information about college options does not necessarily improve the chances of post-traditional students finding their “best fit” college. In this day and age, sophisticated search engines have been developed to simultaneously inform and guide consumer choices based on basic preferences (i.e. Google, Netflix, and Amazon). Help in narrowing options can facilitate the navigation of too much information so that potential students with limited college knowledge can still find a “best fit” college.

Providing useful information about college options early and often in an educational pathway creates awareness and knowledge among students and their families that can help them prepare for their access and success. Maternity wards, K-12 schools, and community-based organizations are viable venues along the educational continuum that can provide information to prepare potential students with a roadmap to enroll in college so that their expectations and costs for persistence and completion are clear.

Identifying post-traditional students is needed to design tailored information and outreach. Disaggregating data by the very characteristics that define post-traditional students can improve the targeted and intentional strategies to reach these students and can further inform the impact of those strategies for effectiveness.

Closing remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspectives on the information students and families need to help their college choices and identifying their “best fit” institutions. *Excelencia* in Education’s strategies to accelerate Latino student success in postsecondary education by applying knowledge to policy and practice are consistent with the efforts you have demonstrated by holding these hearings with diverse representation but a common cause: to increase our nation’s need for a highly educated workforce and engaged civic leadership.

As you make progress in reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, *Excelencia* in Education stands ready to serve as a resource on the experiences of Latinos and other post-traditional students; the identification of what programs and practices work to improve their access, retention, and completion; and, the opportunity to engage with educators and leaders throughout the nation that can inform your important efforts to serve all of us well and ensure our continued prosperity.

¹ The University of Texas, Brownsville posted in 2012 and retrieved January 2013, at <http://www.utb.edu/sa/studentsuccess/gc/Pages/TheBenefitsofGraduating.aspx>
