

Effective Higher Education Recruitment Strategies



Findings from a Research Study of San Antonio College

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Hispanic students value a college education. Among high school graduates, Hispanic students are second only to Asian students in attendance at colleges and universities. Richard Fry of the Pew Hispanic Center summarizes, “There can be no doubt that Latino families are willing to invest in their children’s education” (2002).

Much of what accounts for the gap between enrollment and graduation is a lack of support systems that are available to other students. This, coupled with “underfunded, understaffed, and underperforming high schools,” sets up Hispanic students for failure rather than success (Fry, 2002).

Hispanic student enrollment in higher education has grown from 4 percent of the total student enrollment in 1976 to 9 percent two decades later in 1997 (NCES, 2000). Hispanics are also least likely to be enrolled in a degree-seeking program. Public community colleges account for over half of the total undergraduate enrollment in Texas.

With this as a backdrop, the Intercultural Development Research Association recently completed research to identify effective strategies for recruiting Hispanic and low-income students to enroll in San Antonio College. Funded through the duPont Foundation, San Antonio College commissioned IDRA to identify best practices for recruiting Hispanic and low-income students. IDRA conducted focus group and individual interviews to gather insights on what the target groups perceived to be issues, concerns, and effective strategies.

The findings are informing strategies that the college will use to improve its recruitment of Hispanic, low-income students. This is the first in a series of three articles in the *IDRA Newsletter* presenting the results of this research study, with permission from the community college, San Antonio College. This article summarizes briefly the methodology and outlines the results of the literature review and interviews with several “best practices” universities.



IDRA’s study in 2002-03 was guided by research questions based on the philosophical tenet that the Hispanic community has resources and assets that have yet to be tapped. The questions also are grounded on the fact that Hispanic families value education and want their children to achieve and succeed (Fry, 2002; Villarreal, 2001). From this valuing model, the research questions for this study included:

1. What strategies is San Antonio College using to recruit students both from the targeted group (minority and low-income in specific zip code areas) and the non-targeted group? How effective are the recruitment efforts (as evidenced by enrollment patterns)?

- How many, where, when and how are students recruited?
- Who is involved in the recruitment process? What is the nature of their involvement?

2. What recruitment strategies worked for targeted students who enrolled at SAC?

- Who enrolled at SAC?
- Why did these students enroll at SAC? What factors contributed to their decision?
- From their perspective, what should SAC do to improve their recruitment process?

3. What institutional changes are needed at SAC to improve recruitment for targeted students?

IDRA's methodology relied both on quantitative and qualitative approaches. IDRA conducted an in-depth analysis of archival data, including demographics of students, school staff (administrators, teachers and faculty) at SAC and the San Antonio Independent School District feeder schools in targeted areas. Focus group and individual interviews targeted key stakeholders, including high school administrators, counselors, high school students, their parents, and current SAC students.

To help inform the best practices inventory, IDRA surveyed and interviewed Alianza directors (college and university representatives who were partners with IDRA in a k-16 effort). Alianza was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to recruit, enroll and graduate non-traditional Latino students. After five years of implementation, this program has a wealth of lessons learned that IDRA tapped specifically for the SAC research study.

The surveys, focus group interviews and individual interview questions were developed in partnership with the SAC advisory committee. This advisory group included the college president and central office staff, representatives from the admissions and student recruitment offices, and directors of specialized outreach programs.

Parallel questions were developed for each of the surveys and interviews in order to triangulate responses. It is important to interpret these findings cautiously given the nature of focus group interviews. While the methodology provides an opportunity for in-depth probing and a greater understanding of the issues, the findings are not representative or generalizable for all colleges and universities. In the final analysis, additional studies should be conducted to gain greater understanding of what has emerged from these interviews.



IDRA conducted an extensive literature review focusing on strategies that have proven effective in recruiting non-traditional students, i.e., low-income, minority students. Most research and lessons learned that are featured in the literature are unfortunately, but not surprisingly, deficit - focusing on "fixing" the student or family rather than strengthening or changing the institutions to better serve their clients.

Examples of deficit strategies include the following.

- Expanding efforts to increase student "motivation" to attend college when, in fact, the vast majority of students, including low-income and minority students, already want to go to college;
- Informing low-income, minority parents of the "importance" of college and the long-term financial benefits of a college education when parents already value education and see it as a way for their children to have a better life (Fry, 2002; Villarreal, 2001); and
- An exclusive focus on "fixing" k-12-based functions without looking at any cross-institutional (k-16) barriers such as a lack of curriculum alignment, cross-level communication, or cross-level coordination that impact students' post-secondary

options.

Given the fact that the documented enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of Hispanic, African American and low-income students is still dramatically lower than their non-Hispanic White and Asian counterparts, it should be clear that a deficit approach has not worked.

What is needed is a radical shift from “business as usual” to a profound systemic, cross-institutional change that serves students’ needs and capitalizes on their strengths. The literature clearly shows that college recruitment is most successful when it is part of a process that begins with a child’s first entry into formal schooling. Inherent in this mindset is a universal assumption that all students will graduate and be prepared to enroll in a college or university. More and more studies are re-affirming this approach.

Expanding Alignment and Access

The Stanford University’s Bridge Project, a six-year national study, analyzed high school exit-level policies and college entrance policies to learn if the standards were different. This research showed there were many gaps in knowledge and many misunderstandings between kindergarten through 12th grade (k-12) schools and colleges.

Given these gaps and misunderstandings and their serious implications for students and their parents, the study recommended three actions that would have the most immediate impact.

- Provide all students, their parents, and educators with accurate, high quality information about, and access to, courses that will help prepare students for college-level standards, and do this early in their middle or high school enrollment.
- Focus on the *institutions* that serve the majority of students, because such a focus has the potential of yielding the greatest benefit.
- Create awareness that getting into college is not the hardest part. This translates to expanding the focus of local, state, and federal programs from access to college to include success in college. “High school content, academic counseling, college outreach, and other programming need to reflect this so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college” (Venezia, et al., 2003).

More long-term recommendations include the following.

- Ensure that colleges and universities clearly state, and widely publicize, their academic standards so that students, their parents, and educators have accurate college preparation information.
- Examine the relationship and alignment between the content of post-secondary education placement exams and k-12 exit-level standards and assessments to determine if more compatibility is necessary and possible.
- Review the post-secondary education placement exams for reliability, validity, efficacy, and the extent to which they promote teaching for understanding.
- Allow students to take college placement exams in high school so that they can prepare, academically, for college and understand college-level expectations.
- Sequence undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate high school senior-year courses are linked to post-secondary general education courses.

- Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high schools and colleges so that they include all students, not just traditionally “college-bound” students.
- Collect and connect data from all education sectors, including high school graduation and dropout data and college attendance and persistence information.
- Provide technical support to states by having the federal government establish voluntary data collection standards.
- Expand federal grants to stimulate more state-level k-16 collaboration and integrated policymaking.



A study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy found that low-income and minority high school students are more likely to pursue higher education when given access to programs that provide college information early and persistently throughout their secondary level enrollment.

They found that access to financial aid alone was not enough for students who lack information about or those who do not expect to go to college. Other factors that play a critical role include adequate and appropriate academic preparation, college as a goal of students and their parents, and access to information about college and financial aid.



Since the inception of community colleges in 1901, more than 100 million students have attended community colleges “for everything from workforce retraining to English language acquisition to advanced mathematics for university-level credit” (Bueschel, 2003). While four-year college enrollment has doubled from 1960 to 1990, community college enrollment has increased five-fold.

Community colleges often serve as the point of entry for students who would not otherwise attend college. For many students, the two-year institution is the only way they can improve their chances for a better quality of life - it is their “second chance.”

Public community colleges account for over half of the total undergraduate enrollment in Texas. Cost may be a significant factor impacting selection, with an average community college tuition of \$910, compared to \$2,741 annual average for a public four-year tuition.

While two-year to four-year program transfers have long been considered one of the missions of Texas community colleges, “the state has hesitated to make baccalaureate transfer and degree attainment a specific goal for community college students, because policymakers believe that many students do not want or need to obtain a degree” (Adelman, 1999).

Since 1997, however, as an attempt to facilitate transfers among Texas institutions, Texas has had a transfer “general education core curriculum” that allows individual institutions some flexibility in designating core courses. If a student completes an approved core curriculum, the receiving institution (be it a two- or four-year college) must accept those courses as a substitute for its own core requirements.

In 2001, Texas completed a study of the effectiveness of its statewide transfer policies. The task force’s recommendations for strengthening transfers included improvements in reporting student performance information from receiving to sending institutions, a feasibility study for a statewide electronic degree-audit system, and study of best practices in other states.

Perceived “disconnects” between two- and four-year institutions cause some students to delay enrollment at two-year colleges, which also decreases the probability that these students will transfer to and graduate from four-year institutions.

Findings from Best Practices Institutions - Alianza Universities

In addition to the extensive literature review conducted, IDRA developed a survey for the eight university directors of IDRA’s Project Alianza, a five-year binational, bicultural program to develop teacher preparation models resulting in university graduates prepared and well-qualified to teach in diverse classrooms (<http://www.idra.org/alianza>). Following are the key findings shared by the Alianza university directors.

- Use non-traditional avenues to recruit non-traditional students
 - Spanish-speaking and English-speaking television stations can be very effective in sending out messages to the community. Universities have experienced the greatest success from public service announcements.
 - The k-12 university partnership with local school districts were highly effective for publicizing and recruiting non-traditional students.
 - Create and use inventories of non-traditional students to facilitate recruitment and outreach. The non-traditional student list was developed through announcements made at workshops, such as with the local adult education program. Some non-traditional students were recruited at English as a second language classes.
 - Use nontraditional students as recruiters and mentors. The non-traditional students were provided assistance and peer mentoring from the traditional students in the educational program.
 - Provide financial, social and academic support. Funding support and peer assistance were the most important factors for the non-traditional students.
 - Adapt recruitment strategies in recognition of language and cultural attributes of prospective students. The lack of Spanish proficiency at the universities was the greatest barrier for these non-traditional students (*normalistas* - graduates of *normal* schools in Mexico).
 - Ensure institutional advocacy and persistence for non-traditional student admissions. Advocacy, building relationships with key stakeholders, and consistent follow-up were the most effective strategies.
 - Create flexibility in financial aid packaging. Non-traditional students’ eligibility for financial support was a critical factor considering all costs: tuition, fees, and books.
- Recommendations for recruiting non-traditional students include:
 - Build strong relationships with partner school districts.
 - Establish a memorandum of understanding with the school districts to clarify roles and responsibilities and regularly exchanging information, knowledge, resources, and staff.
 - Be inclusive and far-reaching in developing collaborations with other individuals and entities. This strategy develops exposure for the effort and provides insights to others and access for students to potential employment opportunities.
 - Ensure that students take courses as a cohort.
 - Coordinate with key faculty who are the cohort instructors, sharing information about the group (such as the group’s academic preparation). Also, keep lines of

- communication open throughout each semester.
- Incorporate a faculty or staff person to serve as an active and vocal advocate of the students who consistently meets with key administrators in an effort to find solutions to barriers. The result is greater respect for the students' academic preparation and a program reputation of being innovative and progressive.



The next installment in this series will present the major findings from a review of the archival data and enrollment trends at San Antonio College as well as their recruitment strategies. The third and final installment will reveal the factors that contribute to or hinder low-income minority students from enrolling, achieving, and succeeding in college as told by current and former students and educators during individual and focus group interviews.



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