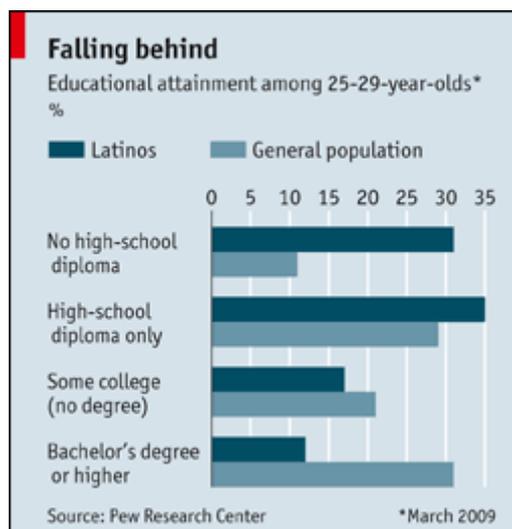


Closing the gap

Improving performance is linked in part to immigration policy.



The University of Texas-EI Paso (UTEP) is one of the most binational of America's big universities. Some 90% of its students come from the borderplex—the Texan city of El Paso and its much larger sister-city, Ciudad Juárez, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. More than 70% of its students are Mexican or Mexican-American.

And that, in turn, means that the El Paso campus is rather different from the University of Texas's flagship campus in Austin. More than half of UTEP students are among the first in their families to go to college, and roughly a third come from families with incomes below \$20,000 a year. Diana Natalicio, UTEP's president, says that for many of her students trouble at work, or an unexpected expense, can derail a whole year of college. UTEP tries to help, offering after-hours advice and instalment plans for tuition fees. Such measures have helped it to become one of the country's leading sources of degrees for Hispanic students.

UTEP's experience provides pointers for college administrators elsewhere, who are looking for ways to close the gap in achievement between Hispanic and "Anglo" students. According to a report in October from the Pew Hispanic Centre, 89% of Latino high-school students say that a college degree is important, but only 48% plan to go to university themselves. Hispanic students are more likely to drop out of high school than Anglos, and those who finish are less likely to go on to college. Those who go are more likely to enroll in two-year community colleges, which have lower rates of completion than four-year universities. In 2007, according to the National Centre for Education Statistics, only 7.5% of bachelor's degrees were awarded to Hispanic students, even though Latinos made up about 15% of the American population that year.

Most Latino college students are native-born Americans, but the Mexican-born students have a hard time, and youngsters without the right documents have the hardest time of all. Stella Flores, of Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, argues that the best thing that can be done at the state level is to adopt policies that allow all of a state's high-school students to pay fees at its public universities at the discounted rate that normally applies to people from that state, regardless of their legal status.

Such policies already exist in a number of states, including California and Texas, where the Latino population is so large that few like the idea of denying a proper education to crowds of undocumented youngsters. A federal bill called the DREAM Act would expand that approach

and provide some undocumented students with a path to citizenship, but it is hardly at the top of the long to-do list now facing Congress. Separately, measures are afoot to expand federal financial aid to students, and over the summer President Barack Obama announced that the federal government is to put about \$12 billion into community colleges.

In the meantime, Deborah Santiago of Excelencia in Education, a non-profit research group, says that some good steps are free. For example, El Camino College in California holds pronunciation classes for staff who might otherwise struggle with Hispanic names. When students are crossing the stage to get their diplomas, they should not have their names butchered in front of the gathered family and friends.

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