Project Overview:

As Rhode Island's first four-year comprehensive institution to be federally designated a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), Rhode Island College (RIC) is proud of this designation and committed to the success of Hispanic/Latiné, and all, students.

United States Senator Sheldon Whitehouse secured federal funding in 2023 to support the college's federal designation as an HSI. Funding will help RIC launch HSI capacity building programs, specifically building and strengthening initiatives broadening educational access, bolstering success outcomes of Hispanic/Latiné students, and providing professional development for employees.

Through this funding, RIC also collaborated with the Latino Policy Institute. LPI evaluates national and local trends about the Latiné community producing reports to generate public policy discourse. Through their reports, LPI presents the social, economic, and civic contributions of the Latiné community within the state of RI. One area of interest for LPI's research and advocacy is in education. LPI focuses on systemic issues Latiné students, including adult learners, face within the education system, specifically around low achievement and access.

The funding aided the development of a LPI report analyzing barriers and opportunities that exist in higher education for Hispanic/Latiné students in Rhode Island, with comparative data from the surrounding region. Along with a comprehensive review of data, the report outlines best practices and recommendations to address policy and systemic impediments to Latiné student success. The report explores how RIC, as an HSI, can address enrollment, retention, and equity gaps that may exist for Latiné identified students.

The executive summary crafted by the Latino Policy Institute provides an overview of national trends in demographic and higher education shifts, recommendations for RIC to support Latiné student success, and how institutions of higher education can utilize this information when building new programs and initiatives.

Rhode Island College is actively working to align this report with the newly adopted Strategic Compass to implement new initiatives centering Latiné students while serving all students.

Executive Summary

As the Latino population continues to become a significant demographic force in the United States, understanding and addressing the educational disparities they face is imperative for ensuring equitable growth and opportunity. For nearly two decades, the Latino Policy Institute (LPI) has been deeply committed to analyzing and communicating the evolving experiences, opportunities, and barriers of Latinos in Rhode Island, especially in the education sector. Since the summer of 2023, LPI has been working with our partners at Rhode Island College, members of the General Assembly, and other policy and educational advocacy organizations to develop a report and recommendations that analyze the state of Latino students in higher education and what opportunities and barriers exist for them. LPI is proud to work collaboratively with our partners in higher education to underscore important recommendations and best practices to continue the work and promote the success of Latino students in our state.

Latinos will account for 60% of the population growth in the United States from 2005 to 2050. Latinos are also expected to constitute **29% of the U.S. population by 2050,** up from 14% in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2008). Yet, Latinos continue to have the lowest education attainment levels among all demographic groups in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This demographic shift, now encompassing one out of every five individuals in the country, has profound implications for various sectors, including education and higher learning. This growth is not limited to national trends alone; it is also evident at the state level. According to the latest data from the U.S. Census in Rhode Island, about ***17.6%*** of the state's population identified as Latino. In addition, 9,786 Latino undergraduate students, **representing 15.5% of the total enrollment,** attend colleges and universities in Rhode Island (HACU State Enrollment List, 2023).

As the Latino population continues to grow locally and nationally, so does the presence and influence of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), a category of minority-serving institutions specifically designated to support and serve Latino students. Federal legislation formally established the designation of HSIs to *enhance educational access and quality for Latino and financially disadvantaged students* (Excelencia in Education, 2023, p. 15). HSI status is a federal designation based on enrollment requiring that 25% of an institution's full-time undergraduates identify as Latino and half qualify for Pell Grants (Excelencia in Education, 2023, p. 15). HSIs are accredited, degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education (Excelencia in Education, 2023, p. 15).

As of 2024, three higher education institutions in Rhode Island have been designated as HSIs, College Unbound (2019-20), Rhode Island College (2020-21), and the Community College of Rhode Island (2021-22). This report highlights the imperative need to prioritize the educational success and equity of Latino students in Rhode Island, focusing on Rhode Island College (RIC) as a four-year college HSI in the state.

As an HSI, RIC is crucial in ensuring Latino students have access to the resources, opportunities, and support they need to thrive academically and professionally. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and educational equity, the college can serve as a model for other institutions in the state, creating pathways to success for Latino students and strengthening Rhode Island's educational landscape. ***The message is clear: it takes a village to support these students, and we all have a role in creating possibilities and empowering future generations of Latino students.***

Key Findings

These key findings were derived from a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative national, regional, and local sources, which looked at the opportunities and barriers within the higher education landscape for the growing Latino demographic. In particular, during the spring of 2024, LPI conducted a series of focus groups and surveys for RIC students, faculty, and staff to learn more about their views and feedback regarding the college's HSI status and the opportunities and challenges Latinos may face at RIC.

1. **Rhode Island College (RIC) and Latino Student Representation**:
   - RIC's Latino undergraduate enrollment steadily increased from 21.1% in 2018 to 26.1% in Fall 2022, making **Latino students the second-largest ethnic group at the institution.** However, despite strong enrollment figures, Latino students experience challenges with graduation rates. The gap between enrollment and graduation rates, particularly for Latino students, underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to improve persistence and completion. In addition to enhancing support services, there is a critical need for culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy reflecting Latino students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. Addressing support systems and the academic environment is essential to fostering an inclusive, equitable educational experience supporting Latino student success.
   - Latino graduate student enrollment also grew, with representation increasing from 10.8% in 2018 to 16.0% in 2022 and 16.9% in 2023, underscoring the expanding presence of Latino students in advanced academic programs.

2. **Graduation and Retention Challenges**:
   - While experiencing consistent enrollment growth, Latino students at RIC face unique challenges influencing their timely graduation. The 4-year graduation rates for Latino students declined from 18.3% (Fall 2012 cohort) to 12.8% (Fall 2016 cohort). However, the relatively stable 6-year graduation rates suggest that many Latino students may be pursuing more flexible, post-traditional academic paths. This could reflect various factors, such as balancing work, family responsibilities, or a preference for taking longer to complete their degrees. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to developing strategies that align with Latino students' diverse needs and aspirations, particularly in fostering academic success and completion within their chosen timelines.

- ○ Retention rates for Latino students have fluctuated, with one-year retention rates averaging 71.4% over five years and only 56.3% still enrolled by the start of the third year, pointing to additional hurdles students face as they progress in their studies. These challenges highlight the **need for targeted interventions** to improve persistence, particularly in the critical sophomore-to-junior transition.

3. **Comparative Trends Across New England**:
   - ○ Latino enrollment data from 2019-2022 reveals that trends in Rhode Island contrast with those in neighboring states such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. While Rhode Island has seen robust growth in Latino full-time enrollment, Massachusetts experienced slight fluctuations in Latino enrollment during 2020 and 2021 but has been experiencing a surge in Latino student enrollment post-2022. This growth reflects the broader demographic shifts in the state, where the Latino population is steadily increasing (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Many Massachusetts institutions are now emerging as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) or have already reached HSI status, signaling a response to the growing Latino student population (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Rhode Island's gains, particularly post-2020, signal the effectiveness of its initiatives aimed at fostering Latino student success. At the same time, Massachusetts' recent surge highlights the importance of continued investment in higher education to support the expanding Latino community. Both states' trends underscore the need for further research to understand regional patterns and the impacts of national events like the COVID-19 pandemic on Latino student enrollment.

4. **Equity Gaps and Support Needs**:
   - ○ The disparities in graduation rates and retention rates between Latino students and their White non-Latino counterparts reflect systemic inequities that require concerted institutional responses. Improving retention and graduation outcomes for Latino students is crucial to ensuring educational equity and addressing their challenges. Continued efforts to expand academic support, mentorship programs, and financial assistance are essential for bridging these gaps.

Recommendations

In partnership with a workgroup composed of General Assembly leaders, RIC staff and faculty, as well as advocacy and education policy leaders, LPI put together a set of comprehensive recommendations to address systemic barriers faced by Latino students—such as academic preparedness gaps, financial challenges, lack of culturally responsive support, and limited engagement with Latino communities—by combining immediate actions with long-term strategies. This approach provides RIC with a framework to support Latino students from enrollment through graduation and career readiness, fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Short-Term Recommendations:
1. **Enhance Faculty and Staff Training on Cultural Competency**: Provide professional development focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure that faculty and staff are prepared to meet the needs of Latino students.

Middle-Term Recommendations:
1. **Expand Mentorship and Internship Programs**: Establish partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations to create opportunities for Latino students.

2. **Increase Financial Aid and Scholarships**: Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the financial aid and scholarships currently awarded to students facing financial need, with particular attention to underserved demographics, including Latino students. This analysis should include an evaluation of existing funding sources and the identification of additional opportunities for financial support. Strengthen partnerships with state and federal programs to expand funding opportunities for students with demonstrated financial need, ensuring equitable access to higher education. This approach will help increase the availability of resources to address financial barriers and support the success of diverse student populations.

Long-Term Recommendations:
1. **Create Comprehensive Student Success Centers**:
   ○ Explore Dedicated Centers: Create student success centers specifically tailored to the needs of Latino students. These centers would provide academic counseling, career services, mental health support, and other resources in a centralized location designed to meet the unique needs of this demographic.
   ○ Embed Support in Key Departments: Also, create liaisons in key student-facing, supporting, and serving departments (such as admissions, academic advising, career services, and mental health counseling). These staff members would be dedicated to ensuring that Latino students receive personalized, culturally relevant support throughout their academic journey. This approach integrates targeted assistance directly within departments that regularly interact with students, enhancing accessibility and support.

2. **Develop a Culturally Relevant Curriculum**: Work with faculty to revise curricula, ensuring they are inclusive and reflect Latino students' diverse backgrounds and experiences.

3. **Advocate for Increased Funding**: Lobby for additional state and federal funding to support Latino-focused scholarships and retention programs, ensuring sustained investment in the success of Latino students at RIC.

Certain recommendations are more time-feasible than others at RIC and higher education institutions. For example, enhancing and providing cultural competency training and support for faculty and staff. Expanding internships and mentoring programs with local businesses and community organizations may take longer but should remain a high priority for the institution.

Additionally, enhancing faculty and staff training on cultural competency is an initiative that can be launched within a year, with direct benefits to the student experience. Long-term recommendations, such as establishing student success centers and developing a culturally relevant curriculum, will take more time to implement fully. However, these are crucial investments for building a supportive infrastructure for Latino students at RIC and should be prioritized as part of the institution's long-term strategic plan.

How can RIC and other higher education institutions utilize this report?

This report is a **strategic framework** for RIC and other institutions to align its goals and initiatives with the broader mission of promoting educational equity for Latino students.

1. **Strategic Planning**: While RIC has made progress by adding some of these recommendations within their current Strategic Compass, HSIs must ensure that the longevity and sustainability of these efforts are supported through ongoing investments and institutional commitment as part of their recurring strategic planning and budget processes.
2. **Policy Development**: Use the recommendations to inform policy changes that enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion within the institution, particularly regarding Latino students.
3. **Resource Allocation**: Guide resource allocation decisions, ensuring that necessary funding and support systems are in place to implement these recommendations and drive meaningful change.

By prioritizing the success of Latino students, RIC can promote educational equity, strengthen community ties, and foster a diverse and inclusive campus environment. More importantly, fostering educational equity for Latino students at RIC and other higher education institutions is not only a moral imperative—it is a strategic priority for the institution and the state as a whole. By implementing the recommendations in this report, RIC can serve as a leader in promoting educational opportunity and success for Latino students, setting an example for other institutions in the state and beyond.