Partnership to address low completion rates in college for minority males


BY RALPH K.M. HAURWITZ - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

It is one of the most persistent and worrisome trends in Texas higher education: College-completion rates for African American males and Hispanic males lag well behind those of other demographic groups.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, researchers and higher education advocates have long noted the trend.

Now, 15 school districts, community colleges and public universities in the state – including the University of Texas, Austin Community College and the Austin school district – have joined together in an effort to improve educational outcomes for minority males.

The Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color, based at UT’s Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, will focus on trying to determine which practices are most effective at addressing the problem, said Victor Sáenz, who leads the consortium. There’s a dearth of research-based evidence on whether mentoring, advising, summer bridge programs to ease the transition from college or other approaches work best, he said in an interview Wednesday.

The members of the consortium operate or plan programs focusing on minority males. Texas A&M University’s Luis Ponjuan, who teaches higher education administration, will serve as an external evaluator of the consortium’s work.

A little more than $1 million, including cash and in-kind support, has been secured to underwrite the project for three years, but Sáenz hopes that will be just the beginning. Funding sources include the Greater Texas Foundation, the Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corp.
A report commissioned last year by the Houston Endowment, a philanthropic organization, highlighted the special challenge facing the state when it comes to minority males.

The report, which tracked all eighth-graders in Texas public schools, found that 23.9 percent of females and 16.1 percent of males went on to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate within six years of their expected high school graduation date. Black males and Hispanic males fared the worst at 7.7 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively.

With Hispanics being the fastest-growing segment of the state's population, "That's a problem that could undermine the state's economic prosperity if we don't address this issue," said Sáenz, who teaches higher education administration at UT and is executive director of Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success).

Research shows that the level of a parent's education, the rigor of high school and family income all seem to influence a student's educational achievement. Other factors are in play as well, Sáenz said.

"Hispanic males often feel inordinate pressure to fulfill family responsibilities that can conflict with educational goals," he said. "They often have a strong desire to work immediately ... rather than see a college degree as a way to move up the economic ladder."

Ernest Aliseda, a UT System regent and a municipal judge in McAllen, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, said he sees evidence of that in truancy cases.

"Sometimes a student will say he had to work at Wendy's till 11, or take care of a younger brother while their mother is working, and the father isn't in the picture," said Aliseda, adding that he is pleased that the consortium includes the La Joya school district, in the Valley, one of the poorest areas of the state. "Encouraging Latino males and other males of color to go to college is very important."

Sáenz said minority males seem to shy away from seeking help at stages during their educational pathway when they need it most, perhaps because they regard a request for assistance as a sign of weakness. A reluctance to seek help also could partially explain why males generally trail females in educational achievement.

"There's no single explanation for why boys are lagging behind girls," Sáenz said. "But we do know it's more dire for minorities."

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