

SPECIAL REPORT: GROWING AUSTIN

HIGHER EDUCATION

For Hispanics, college dreams often stifled

Many feel pressure to leave school to help out at home.

By Juan Castillo and Dan Zehr

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School was always where Francisco Castro shined. It was his ticket out of the working-class Mexican-American barrios of southeast Houston.

At Stephen F. Austin High School, Castro flashed a sparkling 4.3 grade-point average and earned college credits. He graduated fourth in his class, won scholarships and, in 2006, earned automatic admission to the University of Texas.

But at the end of his sophomore year at UT, Castro got the school equivalent of a punch in the gut — he was put on academic probation.

Castro admits he struggled virtually from the day he set foot on campus, not just with poor grades in classes like calculus, for which he says he was ill-prepared, but with the transition of moving to a strange place where he felt isolated and didn't seek help. Later during his freshman year, Castro received heart-rending news that his grandmother was gravely ill with cancer. He fell deeper into a downward spiral, hitting bottom when he was suspended from UT in late 2008.

"I never expected it would turn out the way it did for me," said the soft-spoken Castro, who at 25 speaks earnestly and candidly about those struggles.

The higher education landscape is strewn with stories of college students who didn't make it, but Castro's experience is notable because it encompasses some of the myriad social and cultural factors that influence higher education achievement among Latinos, according to researchers, scholars and advocates working to close education gaps between Hispanics and non-Hispanics.

How well Hispanic students can narrow those educational gaps could go a long way toward fostering Austin's economic future. Demographic experts say the young and growing Hispanic population will become the largest portion of the Central Texas workforce sometime in the next two decades. Yet on the whole, Hispanics tend to be less educated than the workforce at large, even as the skill requirements for meaningful, well-paying jobs are rising.

Researchers cite a range of factors that contribute to the educational disparity among Hispanic students, including poverty, the level of parents' education, familial and financial responsibilities, availability of role models and academic counseling, language, and, in males, an unwillingness to seek help. Other theories abound.

"The reasons ... are truly varied. At risk of generalizing, it is a demographic destiny," said Victor Sáenz, who teaches higher education administration at UT and heads Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success) there.

In its research, including conversations with more than 160 young men enrolled in Texas community colleges and universities, the mentoring project found that young male Latinos considering or pursuing a college degree face no greater challenge than the pull of family obligations.

"There's an immediate

sort of financial pressure to support the family, which I think is an honorable goal and which we ought to hold up as a value," Sáenz said. "But the urgency of their economic circumstance will often outweigh their educational goals."

A strong work ethic and the tug of family are cultural touchstones embedded in Latino families over generations, Sáenz and advocates for Latino student achievement said.

In low-income Latino households, it is common for parents to work two jobs, or for families to care for aging, ailing grandparents or extended family members in the home, said Paul Saldaña, a public affairs consultant in Austin who worked on the city's Hispanic Quality of Life Initiative in 2009-10. As soon as they're old enough, young Latinos in financially strapped households are expected to work to help make ends meet, Saldaña said.

"It goes down to keeping the lights on, keeping food on the table versus the kid going to school," he said.

Each year, the Student Futures Project, a joint research effort by UT's Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, 11 area school districts and the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, surveys high school seniors in the participating districts. Of the Hispanic seniors in 2012 who said they weren't going to college, 36 percent cited financial reasons — double the rates of other ethnic groups, the study found.

"It's the struggles of life," said Javier Hernandez, a Travis County senior deputy sheriff who founded Latino Leaders of America, which mentors students who want to go on to college. His Latino Leaders mentors share personal stories of the struggles they overcame.

"These are opportunities to say, 'You can do it; you've got to break cycles. It's going to be hard, but it is possible,'" Hernandez said.

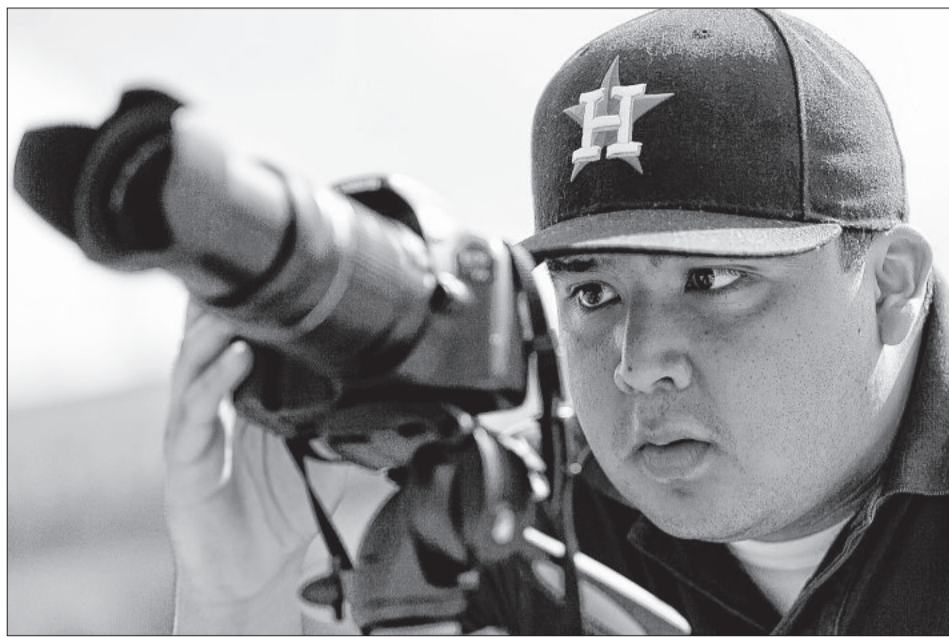
For many Hispanic households, the financial barrier is exacerbated by a lack of familiarity with the financial aid resources available for students. Fewer Hispanic households fill out federal financial aid forms than most other ethnic groups, and few tend to sock anything away for college education.

"On the college savings side, it's about the account and not the amount," said Leslie Helmcamp, a policy analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities. "Even if a low-income family can save a little bit every month and every year, that's part of creating that college-going culture."

Helmcamp and her colleagues are working to help give low-income families a clearer view of college costs and resource availability. According to a national survey by Sallie Mae, the country's largest student loan company, Hispanic families are more likely to cross off a school because of expenses before they even apply. And when they do go to school, they're more likely to run into unexpected expenses, which can lead to higher dropout rates.

Low expectations

Finances can be the biggest barrier for some Latinos, but it is just as important to consider racism, said Angela Valenzuela, who teaches educational administration at UT and is the director of UT's Center for Education Policy. Valenzuela says the educational system his-



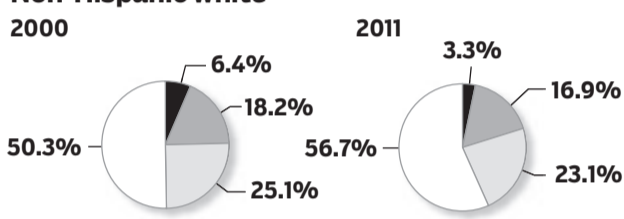
Francisco Castro struggled at the University of Texas before graduating with two degrees. Hispanics encounter difficulties with college, be it finding financial aid, seeking help when they need it or the tug of family to come home. RICARDO B. BRAZZI/EL AMERICANO / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Hispanic education disparities in the Austin metro area

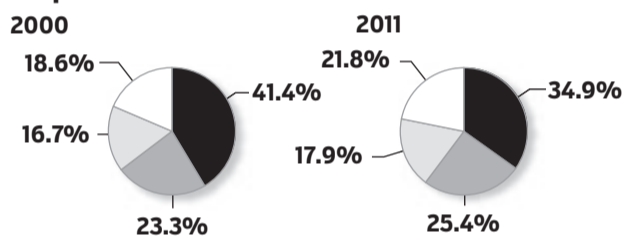
When compared with non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics 25 and older closed gaps in educational achievement since 2000, but still lag behind.

- Less than high school degree
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college, no degree
- College degree or post-graduate degree

Non-Hispanic white



Hispanic



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

ROBERT CALZADA / STAFF

torically socializes Latino youth for lower-status jobs that don't require college degrees.

"People talk about at-risk youth as if it were an aspect of what it is to be Latino or African-American or poor, but more fundamental is that we're talking about youth who are at risk of not fitting in because of their differences, because they come from marginalized communities, because their parents are poorly educated and have not had a positive schooling experience," Valenzuela said.

Latino students are at risk of not belonging because educational institutions construct their differences as deficiencies, she said. Texas needs a new curriculum that accounts for language, bilingual education and a "textured understanding of society hierarchy and how minorities are at the bottom for reasons that are historical and complex," Valenzuela said. Instead of addressing that head on, she said, the state is cutting resources.

While growing numbers of Hispanic students in Central Texas and across the nation are enrolling in college, they're much more likely to go to open-access schools, such as community colleges, than selective universities like UT.

Since 1995, just 13 percent of Hispanic college students went to the country's 468 most selective schools, compared with 82 percent of Anglo students, according to a recent study from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Hernandez, the mentoring group founder, said he's seen students succumb to a culture of low expectations.

"They probably hear that from their own peers. 'I'm Latino. I'm not supposed to go to college,'" Hernandez said.

Bleak outlooks can be born of poor self-imag-

Krysta Atkinson both looked like model college applicants. They graduated among the top students in their high school classes with high GPAs and had parents who encouraged their educational pursuits.

Yet neither one knew where to turn when it came time to figure out the college application and financial aid process. After all, both were the first in their families to go to college.

Instead of counselors at LBJ High School in Austin, Atkinson turned to Google for financial aid advice.

And though it seems unimaginable in the high-stakes competition for college admission and financial aid, Campos began filling out applications only two weeks before they were due.

"I was kind of just going blindly off of nothing," said Campos, a second-year biology pre-med major at UT.

A college talent search program targeting Latino students and run by West Texas A&M University guided Campos through the SAT process and helped him apply to UT and for scholarships.

With her research on the Internet, Atkinson applied for more than two dozen scholarships, winning three. In the spring of 2012, she graduated from Colorado State University with a degree in social work. Now 23, she works at UT as the coordinator for a new scholarship program.

As curious as Campos' and Atkinson's experiences might sound, they are not unusual.

In Central Texas, most Hispanic high school graduates sail into uncharted waters when they head off for college, according to research conducted by the Student Futures Project.

Of the 2012 Hispanic graduates in the participating districts, 61 percent said they would be the first in their family to attend college that year — easily the highest ratio among the various ethnic and racial groups.

"If you get one sibling, the other one sees a pattern, and the parents are learning how to access the system," said Christopher King, director of UT's Ray Marshall Center. "So I think you're going to see spillover effects that are going to help us out."

Many Latino students, even those in honors tracks, do not receive adequate advice on access to college or availability of financial aid, Valenzuela said.

"The research is really clear," she said, "that social class translates into knowledge about these things, the hidden curriculum, certain things you are expected to know, but which nobody ever teaches you."

Financial and family responsibilities had put college out of reach for Marina Atkinson, Krysta's mother. But Mari-

na, who after a divorce raised Krysta and daughter Daeyna on a modest income, made it clear to her girls that their education would come first.

Marina, who works at UT, became emotional recently, explaining why she groomed her girls for college from the day they entered the first grade. "I wanted to make sure they were to have a better life," she said.

Signs of progress

While Hispanic students in Central Texas continue to enroll in college at lower rates than other ethnic groups, they posted the largest percentage increases in college enrollment from 2005 to 2011, moving from 43 percent to 52 percent, according to data from the E3 Alliance, a nonprofit collaboration of business and education leaders.

Nationally, 69 percent of Hispanic high school graduates in the spring of 2012 enrolled in college that fall — their ratio surpassing that of their Anglo counterparts (67 percent) for the first time, according to a report from the Pew Hispanic Center.

Some critics have charged that education is not a priority among Latino families, but most Hispanic parents tend to see higher education as critical to their children's success, according to Sallie Mae's national survey. Two-thirds of Hispanic parents surveyed "strongly agreed" that education was a key part of the American Dream, compared with 41 percent of Anglo parents and 60 percent of African-American parents.

In 2008, when Hispanics had the highest dropout rates in Travis County, Saldaña, the public affairs consultant, surveyed more than 1,000 Hispanic residents for United Way and found that education was their No. 1 concern.

"We need to be making sure our kids are in pre-K educational classrooms and that we start instilling early college goals and the value of a higher education," Saldaña said. "It has to be a family decision supported not only by the kids, but the parents."

But to do their part, Hispanic parents and students need to serve a greater end, said Sáenz, the UT mentoring director, delaying the gratification of joining the workforce right away in favor of increasing their skill levels to better help themselves and their families in the long run. A full-time Hispanic worker with a bachelor's degree will make at least \$700,000 more in career earnings than someone with just a high school diploma, according to census calculations.

Of course, a college degree does not guarantee a financial windfall. With his two degrees, Francisco Castro was working at a retail store part time this summer as he looked for more meaningful work.

But those degrees had allowed him to pursue his passions and to make good on his promise to his grandmother.

In graduating, Castro joined two siblings with college degrees. He credits his parents for laying the groundwork for their success. His father, Francisco Sr., a Mexican immigrant who manufactures pipes, got as far as the sixth grade, and his mother, Olga Lydia, only graduated from high school.

"We had that mindset: 'We want to be successful,'" Francisco said.

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