

# Breaking Down Barriers:

## Understanding Hispanic High School Students' Perceptions on the Transition to College

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# Introduction

The transition from high school to college can be a nerve-wracking process for any student, but some students may face more obstacles than other students along their journey. Hispanic students currently make up roughly 18 percent of all college students<sup>1</sup> and are one of the largest minority groups at universities nationwide. However, based on previous ACT College and Career Readiness Benchmarks, Hispanic high school students tend to score lower than their White counterparts.<sup>2</sup> Further, Hispanic students have lower rates of educational attainment than their peers. Hispanic students may face added barriers in navigating the landscape of applying to college and the steps that go along with it; these barriers include lack of parental knowledge about the process, underfunding in schools for appropriate testing or academic preparedness, and financial instability, to name a few. To assist Hispanic students, ACT's Center for Equity in Learning (the Center) and Univision have partnered to empower Hispanic students and their families in their efforts to help students achieve academic and career success. Both organizations aim to guide Hispanic students through the college application process and to support them in their future success. Univision and the Center, therefore, set out to explore the following questions with Hispanic students:

1

How prepared do Hispanic students think they are for the transition to college?

2

What do students want to know to be prepared as they transition to college?

3

Where are students and families receiving information about the college transition?

4

What are the main concerns about making the transition from high school to college?

5

Do students feel prepared for the rigor of college?

6

What are students' and parents' college expectations?

As college preparedness and success are multidimensional, we used the ACT® Holistic Framework® as a structure for how to interpret and synthesize student responses. This framework identifies the skills and knowledge needed for academic and career success and is composed of four domains:<sup>3</sup>

1

**Core academic skills** focus on the main academic subjects, including English language arts, mathematics, and science.

2

**Cross-cutting capabilities** focus on the tools necessary for educational success, including critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge/use of technology.

3

**Behavioral skills**, or social and emotional skills, focus on interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors important for adaptation to and successful performance in education and workplace settings.

4

**Education/career navigation** focuses on what individuals know about themselves and their environments and how they use this information to make good fit choices, plan actions, and move along their education and career paths.

For all students who are preparing for post-secondary education, it is important to consider how the transition to college may be influenced by the knowledge and skills presented in the ACT Holistic Framework. For Hispanic students specifically, these skills may be particularly important to consider, given the additional barriers they may face.

To better understand the experiences of Hispanic students and their parents, Univision and the Center held a series of focus groups to discuss the college-going process. Forty-four parents and 50 students participated in eight focus groups. Students were in grades 11 and 12, and many of them are first generation, college-bound students. For parents, a majority of them had not attended college, while some had completed their degrees or vocational training outside of the United States in their native countries. Students and parents were interviewed separately and were asked questions about college expectations, future career aspirations and ways to get there, financial aid, college admissions testing, college readiness, and navigating post-secondary education. These interviews were conducted in January 2019 across the United States, including the cities of San Diego, San Antonio, New York City, St. Louis, and Chicago. Students and parents were recruited from different regions of the United States to better understand if there were potential differences in their experiences across geographical locations.

## What We Learned

### Core Academic Skills

Core academics and academic preparation were a major concern for both students and their parents, as academic requirements are likely to be more rigorous once students get to college. Both parents and students saw grades as one of the most important factors to achieve college or career-related goals, as better grades will help students get accepted into more prestigious universities. Overall, students and their parents felt that their teachers and coursework were not preparing students well enough, and that they wished that much more would have been done to prepare them for college coursework. Additionally, students worried that they would be under-prepared in comparison to other students applying to schools they were interested in attending. Parents and students also worried that this lack of preparation could hurt students in the college application process. For example, one student noted that:

**We're underfunded in computers and books, and so we don't get the best education compared to others. So when we compete to get into a college, it's like we're not sure if we're going to get in compared to those other people who are very prepared.**



Students also thought that standardized test preparation was lacking or limited, not only in their coursework, but in additional opportunities outside of class. Students expressed that they were most concerned about the essay portions of standardized tests or their personal essays in their college applications, as they were not discussed (or were only briefly mentioned) at school. One student mentioned:

**In the entirety of the class that I took for [test preparation], we only touched upon the essay part once. And it was just the sheet saying all of the things that the grader would look at. They never really explain how you're supposed to present your evidence because they say that that's for writing class, when, in writing, we're not even doing that much [sic] essays or reading books.**

## Cross-Cutting Capabilities

The skills learned in demanding high school coursework, such as honors, AP, or IB classes, are important for analysis of course content. This becomes increasingly important in college courses, as instructors may offer deeper explanations of material. If students feel under-prepared in their high school courses, they may be missing out on important cross-cutting capabilities, such as critical thinking and other study skills. Specifically, students mentioned getting little information or only an overview about topics in classes and wanted to know more. One student mentioned:

**We barely scratched the surface. Sometimes I will be interested, and then we'll stop that unit. And it's like, why? I have to Google it. Come back. And I do – like, I learn more at home than I do at school.**

Also, as mentioned with core academic skills, if schools are underfunded, then students may not have access to technology and the knowledge necessary for gathering and using information online. The quality of resources that students have access to may vary greatly, which also will affect the cross-cutting abilities they may be able to develop. One student commented:

**I feel like being Hispanic and being in schools that are probably underfunded, you don't get the same resources. You don't read the same books. You just need to have access to more quality.**

Access to technology and the information skills it may provide to students is not equal across different regions of the country. As previous research has shown, racial/ethnic and income-related divides still exist with access to current technology or Internet access, and Hispanic students reported that their main source of accessing the Internet outside of school was through a cellular data plan.<sup>4</sup> When considering the shifts in modernizing technology in school and in the workplace, having the literacy and connectivity necessary when using technology is imperative for future success.



## Behavioral Aspects

Social and emotional learning, or behavioral aspects of education, are also important to consider. The process of applying to college can have a large effect on a student's confidence. More specifically, many students reported that they do not feel as confident in the process of preparing for and taking standardized tests. One student described how the thought of getting a low score would affect the entire college process:

**If you keep getting a low score, then you feel like you're not going to get into the college you want. So you start looking at lower options or you start looking at your safety schools. It really affects your confidence.**

Additionally, students are not as motivated as they would like to be in school. One student mentioned that when thinking about the benefits that college provides, high school "is just an obstacle to get to what I actually want to get to. It's a process, not this inspiration to whatever comes after school." As motivation and confidence can play a large role in a student's education experience, it is important to understand its effect and provide students the tools necessary to help increase their confidence and motivation surrounding school.

## Education & Career Navigation

Because of the pressure of impending application and testing deadlines, students were most concerned about education and career navigation. Hispanic students indicated that they were on their own in the college application process and sought out additional help via the Internet or through their high school counselors. Further, students regularly ran into additional hurdles in their schools, as their counselors lacked experience with specific aspects of the application process, such as applying to private universities. One student remarked:

**We were trying to apply to private schools, and the counselor was telling me was that they didn't know about these programs before because the classes prior weren't applying to that many private schools. So there were things that they didn't know, they weren't exposed to that whole application process, which can be different.**

Students also mentioned that they only received help with their college applications or had their questions answered when they sought out help, rather than school counselors reaching out to them and having ongoing conversations with juniors and seniors. Students specifically noted that “we get the information, but nobody’s going to help you unless you ask.” This can be frustrating or stressful for students who are already attempting this process on their own and may already be dealing with low access to information.



Similarly, students voiced concern that even if they were receiving help on their college applications, they were nervous about not knowing what to expect when they arrive at their university. Rather, they felt as though school staff were only focused on getting the students to college and not what comes after. Specifically, students voiced that they wished school counselors and teachers would take time to discuss what to expect with academics, being in a new environment, and other important information about the college experience. One student commented:

**I feel like high school just focuses on getting you into college, and it really doesn't focus on you staying at the college. When you actually get into the college that you thought you were going to do well at, you notice that you start to like something else, and you end up transferring somewhere else. You end up changing your major. Like high schools don't tell you what the actual experience is at college. You know, some high schools do. Some teachers talk about it. But it's not really, like, the main focus that the school has.**



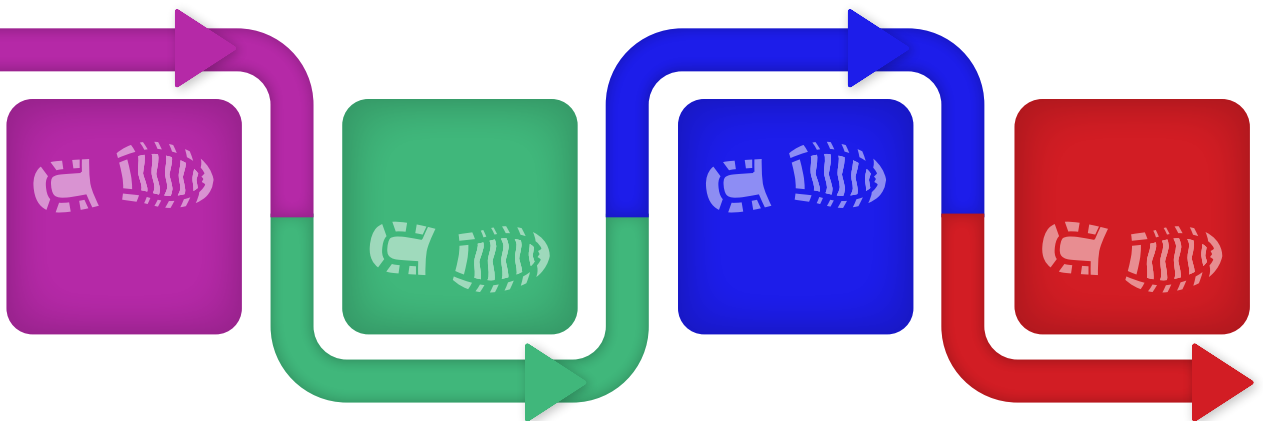
## Recommendations

The transition to college is a complex process involving more than filling out a college application. However, the majority of Hispanic students we interviewed are solely responsible for and carry the burden of completing this complex process. Additionally, college admission tests can be stressful. The tests are perceived as not properly reflecting students' overall strengths, and this can affect their confidence as they navigate through the application process. Students also noted that they need to be better informed about what to expect when they reach college. For them, this would be important as they make decisions about which college they will attend. This information from Hispanic students and parents lead to the following recommendations:

### **Improve opportunities for students to discuss the transition to college with school counselors or other high school staff.**



Proper guidance is needed for Hispanic students to make sense of and complete the necessary steps for success in the transition to and through postsecondary education. Having time set aside for group conversations or having regularly scheduled meetings for a student to talk with a school counselor would be helpful for students to discuss all aspects of the college process. As students mentioned, they wished that school staff would be more proactive, rather than reactive, when it comes to helping students as they are applying for college. Proactive efforts may also help students' confidence by helping them feel better-prepared for testing, especially in areas surrounding topics that students may not have covered in class. It may also help students to have more time for practice questions and tests and spend more time discussing the essay portions of standardized tests.





## **Provide opportunities for parents to be included in the college application process and have questions answered.**

Including parents in the process is vital for both parents and students to understand and support each other, answer questions, or ensure that deadlines are being met. Univision offers parent fairs that give them the opportunity to speak with experts and have questions answered about the college application process. Additionally, having a time specifically set aside for parents, such as a “College Night” at the student’s high school, providing recorded videos of these events for parents that cannot attend, or having an email newsletter for parents about the college application process may help them in understanding not only the application process, but what comes after that, such as applying for college housing or financial aid.



## **Increase resources to ensure first generation or minority students’ college success.**

High schools and universities should take into consideration how first generation or minority students may transition into college, especially as a lack of financial aid is often the largest obstacle for Hispanic students for attending and completing their college degree. Specifically, making students aware of fee waivers for standardized tests and waivers for or access to free test preparation materials, such as ACT Online Prep or ACT® Academy™, is important in order to give students the tools necessary to prepare and take the necessary tests. Univision also puts valuable tools and resources into the hands of parents. Some of these resources can be found on the Univision website: [univision.com/act](http://univision.com/act) and [univision.com/contigo](http://univision.com/contigo). Additionally, having resources available specifically when students arrive at college, such as events to meet other students, information about financial aid and scholarships, or classes to help first-year college students with study skills or other necessary information, could help with this transition. This is especially important, as parents who were a part of the focus groups had either not attended college or did not move away from their families during college. As a result, they may not be able to provide the additional insight that students need in learning about the different facets of the transition to college. Ensuring that universities provide these resources could also help retain students and ensure that they are successful.

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## About ACT's Center for Equity in Learning

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