A Board Chair Sees His Reflection in First-Generation Students

BY LUIS FAURA

FROM THE MOMENT MY FIRST DAUGHTER WAS BORN, MY wife and I stressed the value of education. Flashcards, reading at bedtime, the top schools—I found the whole process motivating. We did it in their best interest, of course, but a big part of me wanted to give my three girls what I never had.

I am the first person in my family to ever earn a college degree. My academic journey led me to attend a community college, after which I transferred to the University of La Verne—the same institution where I have served on the board since 2002, including five years as chair. I joined because of my commitment toward lifelong learning, and I have stayed because, when I see our growing and increasingly diverse student population, quite honestly it is like looking in the mirror.

TAKEAWAYS

1. First-generation and Latino students face significant challenges from the very beginning of their academic journey in higher education.

2. Research studies show that it does not matter how bright these students are; they lack the resources, support, and financial means to reach their goals.

3. A connection to each other and the faculty is what these students need—a chance to be a part of the campus and to feel a sense of belonging to the university. Such bonds are pivotal to whether a student drops out or completes his or her degree.
As a first-generation college student, I worried about how to pay for tuition. I had to work hard to learn new study habits. And I needed to find people who could support me because the process was unfamiliar to my family, having not gone through a college experience themselves. As I survey today’s higher education landscape, at too many campuses and for too many students, very little has changed.

The Disconnect Factor
In the last two decades, the University of La Verne has experienced a tremendous shift in its demographics, especially within the Latino student population. Nearly 40 percent of La Verne’s traditional undergraduate students are the first in their families to go to college, and 69 percent of that group is Latino—far higher than the national average. According to a study by the Council of Independent Colleges, about two-fifths of first-generation students are people of color.

Such students face significant challenges from the very beginning of their academic journey in higher education. Research studies show us that it does not matter how bright these students are or what their ethnic background is. Underserved students lack the resources, support, and financial means to reach their goals. For example, The Campaign for College Opportunity’s recent study, “The State of Latinos in Higher Education in California,” reported that seven out of 10 Latino high-school graduates in the country are enrolled in college, yet they still have very low degree attainment, compared to other ethnic groups. At the same time, USA Today reported in 2010 that roughly 30 percent of entering freshmen in America are first-generation college students, and 24 percent are both first-generation and low-income students—and that nationally, as many as 89 percent of low-income first-gens leave college within six years without a degree.

So what is or is not happening to move these students from opening up their acceptance letters to actually reaching commencement day and accepting their degrees?

About the University of La Verne

The University of La Verne is located in the town of La Verne, 35 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. It is a Carnegie doctoral/research institution that enrolls more than 8,700 students across four colleges (business, education, arts and sciences, and law) at the main campus in the city of La Verne and at 10 off-campus sites throughout Southern California. The four colleges include undergraduate programs; graduate programs in education, business, family therapy, and public administration; and doctoral programs in education, psychology, law, and public administration. La Verne also has thriving online programs that give working adults access to undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs—many in counties where degree attainment is lagging.

It is vital that from their very first days on our campus, we work to assist and support first-generation and Latino students and their families. Even though they have met the requirements to get into college, many are not prepared to succeed. At the California State University system, for example, one in three freshmen entering in the fall of 2012 failed the math and English tests that measure whether students are ready for college work. That statistic points to the root of the problem: Without program support at the college level—and not just remedial— these students will continue to enroll, but they will not persist to graduation.

Why? Because of a disconnect factor. When I was in high school, my mother, a Cuban immigrant to this country, not only told me that I was going to college, but she also even told me where to apply. And when my acceptance letter from La Verne arrived, she told me it was her proudest moment. She felt that she had reached her goal. I was accepted into college, and like so many other parents, my mother felt that getting into college was the success.

Now, as a board chair and parent, I can see the missing part of the student-success equation. Countless marketing campaigns push the idea of getting into a college or university as the goal. But once first-generation and Latino students are in the higher education system, what are we doing to help them succeed through to graduation and beyond? Who is there supporting them or explaining to their parents what it actually takes to do the work and earn that degree?
The La Verne Board's Commitment

With the shift in our student demographics at La Verne, I knew as board chair that we needed to do some work. Around the same time, our president was getting ready to retire, presenting the opportunity to bring in new leadership. The board and I met to discuss what we wanted to see in our next president. We came to a consensus: We needed a leader who would help our institution do a 180-degree turn—someone who would be bold and dynamic and not afraid of change.

We saw those things and more in Devorah Lieberman, an international and intercultural scholar, who came to us from Wagner College, where she had served as provost. During her interviews, it was clear she had a leadership philosophy that fully aligned with our mission: to provide opportunities for students to achieve their personal goals and to become successful professionals and contributing members of the global community through a student-centered, values-based, and diverse learning environment.

Since joining the university, Lieberman has built on our past success and helped formulate "The La Verne Experience," which combines high-impact practices with our values-based education across all the institution’s colleges and campuses. As soon as an undergraduate student sets foot on the campus, his or her La Verne experience begins and continues through graduation. Each student becomes a member of a learning community dedicated to making connections, is engaged in that community, and is asked to reflect on his or her learning through written and oral communication. A connection to each other and the faculty is what so many of these underserved students need—a chance to be a part of the campus community and to feel a sense of belonging to the university.

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The Largest Minority: Latino Students

In 2011, for the first time in history, Latino student enrollment at four-year colleges topped 2 million—making these students the largest minority on college campuses—roughly 16.5 percent of all American college students. Nationally, 11 percent of colleges and universities now qualify as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), a figure that will probably increase as Latino students reach at least 25 percent of full-time-equivalent student enrollment, the federal requirement for being designated an HSI. The University of La Verne clearly fits that designation.

The growth of Latino and Hispanic enrollment is only expected to continue in coming years. According to the Pew Research Center, by 2050, Hispanics will more than double their share of the nation’s population, to 29 percent. In California, the Latino population is projected to become the single largest race or ethnic group this year, making up 39 percent of the state’s population, as noted in a report on shifting demographics in California Governor Jerry Brown’s (D) 2014–15 budget proposal.
What La Verne Is Doing to Meet Student Needs:

The Masters Academy has provided college-readiness workshops to more than 800 students since 2006. Students attend six Saturday workshops, held twice annually at local churches and faith-based organizations within Los Angeles County, to learn how to be ready for college. There are no prerequisites to participate, and it is open to 8th- to 11th-grade students for a nominal fee.

The Latino Education and Access Development (LEAD) Conference helps retain underserved minority students. Over the past two years during Hispanic Heritage Month, the LEAD Conference at La Verne has hosted nearly 2,000 students and their families on the campus at a daylong conference designed to encourage college attendance. Guest speakers serve on panels and provide insights about their lives and careers, and financial aid and admission workshops are offered.

The Reach Summer Business Camp, organized by the College of Business and Public Management for three weeks each summer, helps high-school students learn more about college life. Students who participate live in university residence halls, eat in the dining hall, and participate in a mini-college life experience. Faculty members challenge them to create their own concept for a business and develop a business plan. The program, which is entering its ninth year, has served nearly 400 students from a variety of Southern California school districts.

Today, I can tell anyone who knows La Verne that what we are giving our students is so much more than what I experienced as a first-generation college student, thanks to La Verne's curricular and co-curricular programs, learning communities, theory-to-practice learning, and, most important, our administration's and faculty's commitment toward our common goal to support first-generation students. Our board, administrators, and faculty members are committed because we know that this effort transforms each student's life and goes beyond that.

The degrees earned by these students all have a multiplier effect and have the potential to make higher education a part of their family's lives for generations to come. Moreover, educating such students enhances significantly their potential contributions to society as a whole. For example, in California alone, Hispanic-owned businesses contribute more than 650,000 jobs and more than $100 billion annually to the state's economy.

Our efforts have taken countless hours of work by many people, but the results have been gratifying. This year, the University of La Verne's graduation rates are 10 percent higher than those at our state university system's. Our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is 87 percent. Our graduate loan default rate is 4.9 percent, which is lower than the state and national averages—demonstrating that our alumni are working and thriving.

In addition, within the last six years, our entering SAT score has increased more than 50 points without a drop in underrepresented minorities, proving that partnerships with our feeder districts are also helping students arrive at our campus better prepared.

In addition, several philanthropic organizations have noticed what our university is doing to help these students and are contributing to their successes. In recent years, we have raised more than $1.5 million in new support to increase student scholarships, student retention programs, and parent-empowerment workshops.

As the president and CEO of a multimillion-dollar food distribution company, I know that the work we are doing today contributes to a better tomorrow for all of us. The power behind these underserved student populations—not only Latinos, but also all minority students—and the potential they have to change this world for the better is a valuable resource worthy of investment of our budget dollars and our full attention. The future of our communities and our nation is dependent upon our work today with these students.

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