

# The Chronicle of Higher Education

## Building Latino Male Achievement

**One university hopes to narrow the performance gap by providing mentors for Latino undergraduates, who in turn mentor schoolchildren**

*By Kelly Field* JULY 02, 2017 *PREMIUM*

AUSTIN, TEX.



*Ilana Panich-Linsman for The Chronicle*  
*Enrique Aguayo counsels a student at Martin Middle School, in Austin. Mr. Aguayo, a graduate student at the U. of Texas at Austin, works for Project MALES, which stands for Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success. In the program, undergraduate- and graduate-school mentors try to guide Latino boys to college.*

Middle school-age boys aren't known for their emotional candor. Boys of color, even less so.

So when Enrique Aguayo asks a group of eighth graders if they are nervous about entering high school, he gets only a couple of nods, and one acknowledgment.

"I'm worried about not passing," admits Hipolito, a student at Consuelo Mendez Middle School. "I can handle basic math, but algebra — uh-uh."

"You think you got it bad. I got geometry," Alberto chimes in.

The boys are more comfortable dissing Enrique, a graduate student in college administration at the University of Texas at Austin. "Your layups are trash," one boy says. "You work out with calculators," says another.



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Welcome to [Project MALES](#), a mentoring program at Austin that is part of a small but growing effort to get more Latino males into and through college. The program, which pairs undergraduates with middle- and high-school students and graduate students with undergrads, has sent more than 50 mentors into Austin public schools this year. Over pizza and pickup basketball, the student mentors offer lessons in leadership and college preparation.

The push to graduate more Latino men comes as Hispanics are finishing high school and starting college at record rates. Over the past two decades, the share of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college has gone from 21 percent to 37 percent, and the number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics has more than tripled, according to the U.S. Education Department.

But Hispanics continue to trail their white peers when it comes to college enrollment and completion. While more than half of white 25- to 29-year-olds now hold at least an associate degree, only just over a quarter of Hispanics in that age range do. And Latinos lag behind Latinas, who now earn more than 60 percent of all associate and bachelor's degrees, and almost two-thirds of master's degrees, awarded to Hispanics.

Those gaps have been attributed to a variety of factors both economic and cultural. Compared with white students, Latinos are more likely to attend impoverished schools with inexperienced teachers and high leadership turnover. They are more likely to live in poverty, and less likely to have a parent who attended college.

Hispanic boys, meanwhile, are often socialized in ways that lead them into the work force instead of college. A culture of "machismo" can discourage young Latinos from seeking help when they struggle academically, while *familismo* — valuing close family ties — can encourage them to work to provide for their families.

That's an "honorable decision," says Victor B. Sáenz, one of the founders of Project MALES, but one with profound implications for Latino families and the U.S. economy at large. Hispanics are the nation's largest minority group, expected to make up 29 percent of the nation's population by 2060, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Already, 18 percent of the nation's population, and almost one in every four elementary-school students, is Hispanic.

If these students don't graduate from college in higher numbers than the current crop of young Latinos, there won't be enough educated workers to fill the high-skilled jobs left vacant by retiring baby boomers. In forgoing college, young Latino men may be consigning themselves to a "permanent underclass," Mr. Sáenz, an associate professor of higher education, says.

Project MALES is working to prevent that scenario. By providing middle- and high-schoolers with role models who may be missing in their schools and neighborhoods, its mentoring program aims to create a college-going culture among young Latinos.

There's still not much concrete evidence of the program's effectiveness, but early signs are encouraging. In its first seven years, Project MALES has reduced chronic absenteeism in the schools it serves and raised college aspirations among its participants. Undergraduate mentors say the program gave them a sense of community and influenced their decision to pursue graduate school.

More-concrete data could come next year, through an agreement that is giving the program access to the Austin school district's student-tracking system.

## ‘A Silent Crisis’

When Mr. Sáenz and Luis Ponjuan published their seminal article, "[The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education](#)," in 2008, there weren't many researchers studying Latino males. While colleges were working to close the achievement gap between black men and women, the divide between Latinos and Latinas remained "a silent crisis," Mr. Sáenz says.

So the researchers started Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success). Since its inception at one high school in 2010, the program has grown to serve eight middle and high schools and more than 100 students.



*Ilana Panich-Linsman for The Chronicle*

*A Project MALES mentor advises Latino boys. Females earn more than 60 percent of all undergrad degrees among Latinos. The mentors, who are college students, try to close that gap.*

The project, which works in groups and one on one, targets students who are neither certain to attend college nor likely to drop out of high school. Most are Latino, though the program also serves African-American boys. Two-thirds of mentees do not have a parent or guardian who attended college.

Many of the mentors are first-generation students themselves, but they're not exclusively male. In fact, more than half are female — a share consistent with the UT student population. Emmet E. Campos, the director of Project MALES, says some of the mentees relate to women better than to men. "For a lot of these young men, the father is absent or works two jobs," he says. "So their role models are women — their mom, their *abuelita*."

While the program encourages students to attend college, it doesn't insist on a degree. Its focus is less on academics than on social and emotional development — the soft skills students need to succeed in college and in life.

One of those skills is coping with failure. Latino boys, who are traditionally given a position of privilege in the family, aren't being raised to be as resilient as Latina girls, Mr. Sáenz says. "At the first sign of failure, they tend to throw in the towel," he says. "They'd rather go out and be a bread-winner."

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Project MALES both acknowledges and challenges Latino cultural and gender norms. Mentors share data on the economic benefits of a college degree, showing students that it could make them better providers. They teach boys how to manage debt so they're less nervous about borrowing. (Latinos are often debt-averse). But they also teach mentees how to ask for help, and create an environment where the young men feel comfortable opening up.

The program's reliance on undergraduate mentors is both a strength and a limitation. Middle- and high-school students can see themselves in the mentors, who are often a couple years older than them. At times, though, the program has been "stretched for numbers," says Mike Gutierrez, program coordinator for Project MALES.

Finding enough graduate students to match the growing number of undergraduate mentors has been a challenge, too. This year, the program switched to a more informal mentoring arrangement: Grad students teach a service-learning class and offer guidance to students considering grad school.

These days, more colleges are paying attention to Latino male success, offering mentoring and peer groups along with academic advising and study skills. But programs for black men and "men of color" generally still far outnumber programs for Latinos, according to a recent survey by the social policy research group [MDRC](#). Another recent survey suggests that may be partly because some college leaders still aren't aware of the Latino-male achievement gap, or fear that creating targeted programs could create a political backlash.

Comparing student-success programs for minority men is hard, since colleges track a variety of student outcomes and measure them differently. Mr. Ponjuan, an associate professor of education and human development at Texas A&M University, says

colleges need to build a "culture of evidence" for such programs. He oversees program evaluation for a consortium of colleges that Project MALES created in 2014 to spread best practices. "A lot of institutions are not taking the time to do the granular analysis to see how their policies and programs are affecting students" of different races and genders, he says.

Back at Consuelo Mendez Middle School, Enrique Aguayo, the graduate student, is urging the boys to come to the university's summer leadership academy. They're noncommittal, until he tells them "it's going to be a party with [Con Mi Madre](#)," a college-prep program for Latina girls.

"For real?" asks Billy, intrigued.

Victoria Martinez, then a senior at UT, says it was "really difficult" getting the boys to talk, at first. Now, at the end of the year, "I have one student I call *chicle*, because he sticks to me, like gum."

Charts:

<https://www.theatlas.com/charts/SJcOsAfNb>

<https://www.theatlas.com/charts/SJJazKb4W>

<https://www.theatlas.com/charts/HknjRHb4Z>

<https://www.theatlas.com/charts/S1wTeYZVb>

## Degrees Conferred to Hispanic Students, 2004-5 and 2014-15

Type of Degree, year	Number of Degrees
All associate 2004-5	78,557
All associate 2014-15	180,515
All B.A. 2004-5	101,124
All B.A. 2014-15	217,781

Type of Degree, year	Number of Degrees
All doctorate 2004-5	6,115
All doctorate 2014-15	11,257
All M.A. 2004-5	31,639
All M.A. 2014-15	58,684
Female associate 2004-5	48,899
Female associate 2014-15	111,263
Female B.A. 2004-5	61,634
Female B.A. 2014-15	130,990
Female doctorate 2004-5	3,252
Female doctorate 2014-15	6,246
Female M.A. 2004-5	20,138
Female M.A. 2014-15	37,355
Male associate 2004-5	29,658
Male associate 2014-15	69,252
Male B.A. 2004-5	39,490
Male B.A. 2014-15	86,728
Male doctorate 2004-5	2,863
Male doctorate 2014-15	5,011
Male M.A. 2004-5	11,501
Male M.A. 2014-15	21,349

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