

**avanza**

North Carolina Community Colleges  
Advancing Latino Student Success

# SUPPORTING LATINO STUDENTS

*Postsecondary Latino Access and Attainment*



**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

College of Education  
Belk Center for Community College  
Leadership and Research

## INTRODUCTION

The United States has seen relatively fast and significant growth in the Latino student population at institutions of higher education (IHEs). This tremendous growth has impacted the education system as educators work to provide these students with necessary tools and resources to be successful. Despite the growing number of Latinos enrolling in higher education, there is still a large attainment gap at IHEs across student subgroups.

Increasing Latino access and attainment of postsecondary degrees and credentials is critical to ensuring individuals have access to life and family-sustaining career pathways. Attainment, in turn, generates considerable positive economic impact for individuals, as well as the economy at large. It is estimated that increasing the national Latino high school graduation rate to 90 percent would expand the nation's GDP by more than \$1.5 billion, and that increasing the Latino postsecondary attainment rate by one percent would increase the nation's GDP by over \$5 billion in 2022.

Postsecondary education has the power to support the Latino population to overcome employment barriers and increase economic mobility, as well as close gaps in workforce needs across the country. As stakeholders, policymakers, and higher education leaders consider their role in increasing Latino student enrollment and attainment, it is critical to understand the barriers that Latino students face and understand which practices can support an equitable education and opportunities for this growing population.

*The terms Hispanic and Latino refer to two different, partially overlapping groups: Hispanic refers to a person with ancestry from a country whose primary language is Spanish. Latino, and its variations, refers to a person with origins from anywhere in Latin America (including Mexico, South and Central America, and the Caribbean). To be as inclusive as possible, this brief will use the term Latino, unless otherwise specified by the data source.*

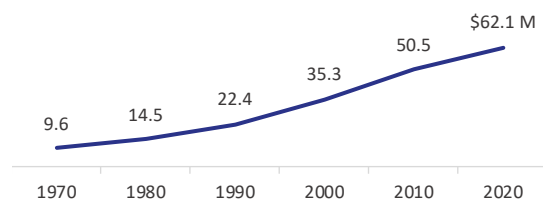
## The Growing Latino Population

The Hispanic population is currently the largest minority group in the nation, making up 18.7 percent of the

## NORTH CAROLINA'S POPULATION

North Carolina's Hispanic population has increased to 1,118,596 residents according to the 2020 Census. The state's Hispanic population grew from just over 75,000 in 1990 to 800,000 in 2010, and between 2010 and 2020, North Carolina's Hispanic population grew by nearly 320,000 new residents. As one of the largest growing racial/ethnic groups in the state it is imperative that they are set up for success as they continue to be avid contributors to North Carolina's workforce and economy.

**Figure 1: U.S. Hispanic Population Over Time**



Source

population (Figure 1). As of 2017, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Latino individuals was \$2.3 trillion. With such a high percentage of growth, there is greater necessity of access and resources for postsecondary pathways, employment opportunities, and economic development.

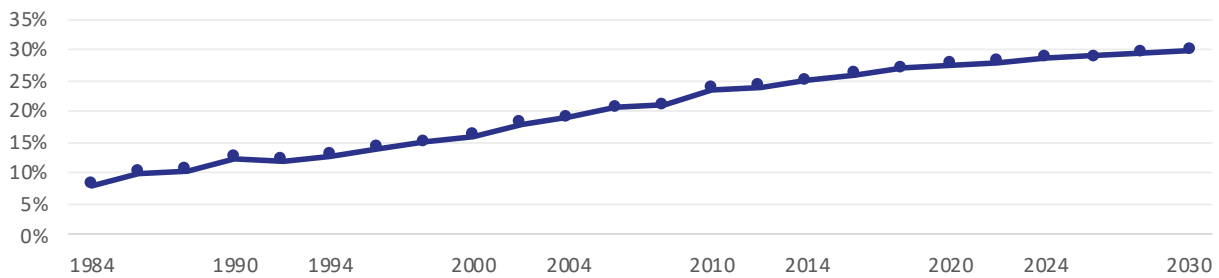
## SUPPORTING LATINO STUDENTS

Reflecting the national growth of the Latino population, the growth of Latino students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools has increased over time (Figure 2). By 2030, it is estimated that 30 percent of elementary and secondary students will be Latino. However, Latino students continue to experience inequities across the education continuum. For example, Latino students are less likely to attend a high-performing school in comparison to their white peers and continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the educator workforce. Additionally, research has linked the ongoing gap in Latino high school graduation rates and academic performance to factors such as a lack of training for school personnel working with this

specific population, segregation of school districts by low socioeconomic status, lack of bilingual resources, financial stressors, and limited broadband access.

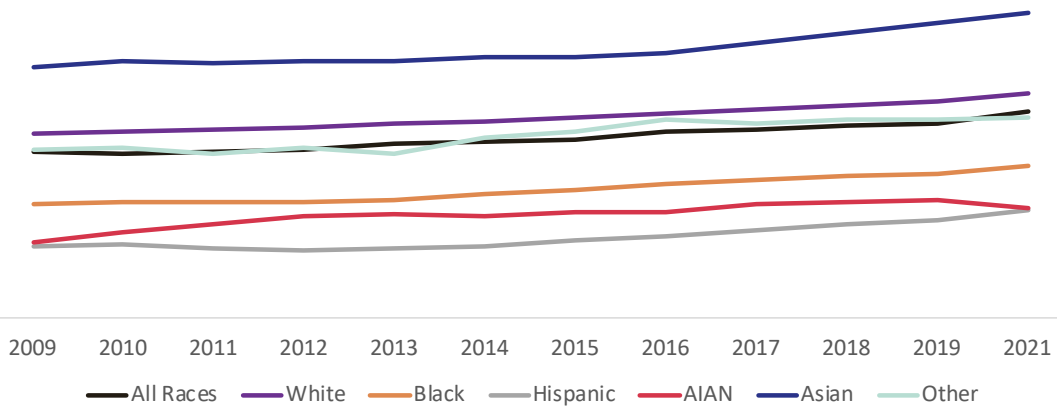
Increased enrollment in the secondary education system has resulted in an increase in Latino students considering pathways to higher education. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of Latinos enrolled at four-year institutions jumped from 620,000 to 2.4 million, a 287 percent increase. Nationally, one in five students enrolled in higher education are Latino. However, while Latino high school graduation rates have improved substantially, their postsecondary attainment rates are still significantly

**Figure 2: Percentage of Latino Students Enrolled in Elementary and Secondary Schools in the United States**



Source

**Figure 3: National Attainment Rates by Race/Ethnicity**



Source

lower than those of their white and non-Hispanic peers (Figure 3). There are many factors that contribute to the postsecondary attainment gap, including socioeconomic status, language barriers, and many students being first-generation college students.

## Barriers to Postsecondary Enrollment

A traditional college student is often defined as someone who enrolls in college full-time immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on their parents, and does not work while attending college. However, relatively few Latino students fit this definition (Figure 4).

### Figure 4: Latino Postsecondary Student Profile

- Latinos make up 36 percent of traditional student (18-24) enrolled in postsecondary education.
  - Latino students are overrepresented at community colleges. 28 percent of all students enrolled are Latino, despite Latino students being only 20 percent of the entire student population.
- 44 percent of Latinos are first-generation students.
- 76 percent of full-time Latino students receive some type of federal financial aid.
- 59 percent of Latino students work in addition to being enrolled at an IHE.
  - 33 percent worked more than 40 hours per week
  - 19 percent worked between 30-39 hours per week
  - 26 percent worked between 20-29 hours per week
  - 21 percent worked between 1-19 hours per week

Source

“

**Most Latinos are commuting students, and therefore transportation has to be the key factor in whether they're able to attend and succeed in college.”**

**ANTONIO FLORES**

*President and CEO of the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities*

While a postsecondary degree or credential is more important than ever, the cost of attending higher education has also never been more expensive for students and families, even when adjusted for inflation. Students from low-income and under-resourced areas have seen the pool of affordable public postsecondary options shrink. As of 2019, less than 25 percent of public four-year institutions were affordable for a student who was eligible for a Pell grant. Students that choose to take out loans to cover the growing gap between tuition cost and financial aid often find themselves saddled with student loan debt. Transportation also impacts attainment and completion with Latino students being more likely than their peers to report a lack of access to transportation as a barrier to postsecondary college completion.

Additionally, for Latino students who are first-generation, the bureaucracy of applying to and enrolling in higher education can act as a key barrier to postsecondary attainment. Families who have never navigated the college preparation process, including the Residency Determination System (RDS), Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and college application submissions are more prone to experiencing obstacles to completing these processes.

## Policy Considerations | Increasing Latino Enrollment

- **Develop hands-on approaches to increase FAFSA completion.** Utilizing innovative strategies to support completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) can aid in increasing postsecondary enrollment. For example, an analysis of a customized nudging process in [Texas](#) that included personalized messaging and counseling was linked to increase FAFSA completion.
- **Consolidate state financial aid programs.** The bureaucracy and complexity of state financial aid programs can serve as a barrier to students' access to postsecondary education, especially for historically underrepresented student populations. In North Carolina, the state has consolidated the UNC Need-Based Grant, NC Lottery Scholarship, and the NC Community College Grant into one program, the [NC Need-Based Scholarship Program for Public Colleges and Universities](#).
- **Increase Latino enrollment efforts and recruitment to encourage higher and faster transfer rates.** Latino students participating in programs like Howard Community College's [Ambiciones](#), the University of Texas at San Antonio's [ACE Scholar Program](#), and SUNY at Albany's [Educational Opportunity Program](#) higher transfer rates to four-year institutions and higher graduation rates than their peers.
- **Expand support for existing organizations and initiatives aimed at increasing enrollment.** Organizations such as [Gear Up](#), [College Advising Corps](#), [LatinxEd](#), [Trio programs](#), and [Juntos](#) have direct impacts on supporting student aspirations and increasing postsecondary enrollment. Additionally, programs enhancing student support and family engagement services often support students as they navigate application processes and foster positive engagement with postsecondary pathways. For example, the [Juntos program](#) engages families via a six-week workshop series and offers family nights and events to help engage parents/guardians in their youth's academic journey.

For some Latino students, there is an additional hurdle to postsecondary affordability: their immigration status.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS	DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS (DACA) STUDENTS
<p><a href="#">Undocumented students</a> are students who are not U.S. citizens nor permanent residents of the U.S., do not have a visa to reside in the U.S., and have not applied for legal residency in the U.S. Undocumented students are <a href="#">not eligible for federal financial aid</a>, including Pell grants, student loans, and federal work study opportunities. Nationally, there are nearly <a href="#">600,000</a> undocumented K-12 students and over <a href="#">840,000</a> undocumented residents between the ages of 18-24.</p>	<p>Starting in 2012, <a href="#">Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals</a> (DACA) allowed certain undocumented youth who came to the U.S. as children to be granted permission to stay in the U.S. and work for temporary, renewable periods. To qualify, individuals must meet age, education, and length of residency requirements, including being between ages 15 to 36; being enrolled in school, having completed high school or an equivalent, or being a veteran; and having entered the U.S. prior to 2007 and before the age of 16.</p>
<p><b><a href="#">427,000 UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS</a></b> are enrolled in higher education, representing approximately <b>two percent</b> of the student population.</p>	<p><b><a href="#">181,000 DACA STUDENTS</a></b> are enrolled in higher education, representing <b>0.8 percent</b> of the student population.</p>

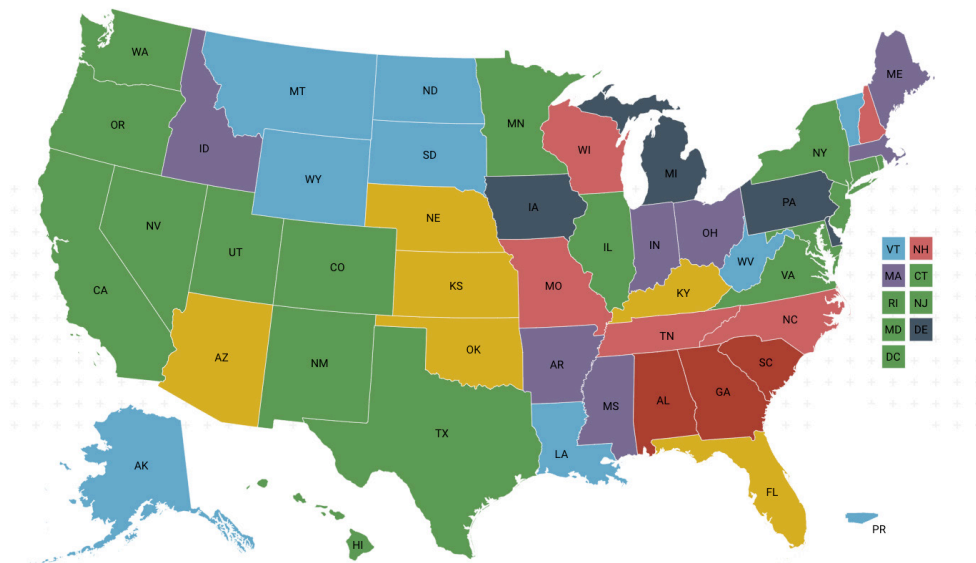
Mixed status families refers to students who fall into one of two categories:

- Are undocumented but have family members who are Legal Permanent Residents or U.S. Citizens; or
- Are Legal Permanent Residents or U.S. Citizens but have family members who are undocumented.

Undocumented, DACA students, and students who come from mixed status families, face many barriers to entry and completion of higher education, including unique psychological and social burdens tied to their legal status and a lack of access to social capital that fosters postsecondary student success. Nonetheless, one of the largest barriers to undocumented students accessing higher education is the lack of access to in-state tuition benefits and financial aid.

State policies related to tuition equity for undocumented students vary, from having comprehensive access to financial aid to restrictive or even prohibited aid and/or enrollment. Figure 5 demonstrates various in-state tuition and financial aid policies that affect DACA and undocumented students across the country.

**Figure 5 | Tuition & Financial Aid Equity For Undocumented Students**



- **Comprehensive Access:** Policies provide statewide access to in-state tuition and some state financial aid or scholarships for the state's resident DACA recipients and undocumented students.
- **Accessible:** Policies provide statewide access to in-state tuition for the state's undocumented students, including DACA recipients.
- **Limited:** Policies provide the state's undocumented students, including DACA recipients, with access to in-state or reduced tuition in at least some public institutions.
- **Limited to DACA:** Policies provide the state's DACA recipients with access to in-state tuition in at least some public institutions.
- **No State Policy:** No known policies on access to in-state tuition or state financial aid for the state's DACA recipients and undocumented students.
- **Restrictive:** Policies actively bar access to in-state tuition or state financial aid for the state's undocumented students, including DACA recipients.
- **Prohibitive Enrollment:** Policies actively bar enrollment in all or certain public institutions for the state's undocumented students, but may still allow DACA recipients to enroll.

Source

For states with limited, restrictive, and prohibited enrollment of undocumented students, IHEs must often find and utilize institutional and community resources to connect students with funding streams. While public institutions are required to follow state policies, many private IHEs have more flexible financial aid packages. DACA and undocumented students are eligible to apply for private scholarships from their communities and national organizations; however, the [competitive pool of students applying for limited scholarship funding](#) and battling out-of-state tuition costs make the ability to attend higher education extremely difficult. Many initiatives have been created by nonprofit organizations to mitigate the barriers, including creating a scholarship bank geared towards DACA and undocumented students. Organizations such as [Golden Door Scholars](#) and [TheDream.US](#) partner with IHEs that are committed to helping DACA and undocumented students complete their education by providing scholarship support.

Improving postsecondary affordability for undocumented and DACA students has positive attainment and community outcomes. [Research shows](#) that removing financial barriers to higher education for undocumented students increases college enrollment and improves academic achievement and first-semester retention. [Eighty-five percent](#) of participants from one study reported that DACA had a positive impact on their education. Additionally, DACA students [reported](#) higher rates of employment, better forms of financial support, better access to transportation, and more stable housing.

## Policy Considerations | Supporting Undocumented and DACA Students

- **Educate K-12 teachers, counselors, and administrators on [how to support undocumented students in applying to college, including the residency qualifying process](#).** It is also important for secondary and postsecondary faculty and staff, across institution types, to be knowledgeable of in-state tuition policies to support undocumented students. States and institutions should consider providing targeted support to students in under-resourced neighborhoods to ensure they have access to pertinent information and knowledge.
- **Ensure that private institutions are provided with support and funding to enroll undocumented students.** Nationally, [about 20 percent](#) of undocumented postsecondary students attend private colleges. Policymakers should consider making state-level financial aid funding for undocumented students available regardless of the institution type in which they enroll.
- **Beyond tuition rates, consider the impact a student's immigration status has on [access to financial aid](#) under current policies.** While access to in-state tuition rates is critical in reducing the cost of education, lack of financial aid can still make higher education costs prohibitive. Increasing state aid for all students, while also allowing undocumented students to have access to aid, would ensure more students attain a postsecondary degree/credential.

“

It's remarkable for undocumented students to even apply to college. I mean, we come from another country; we have to learn English; we face a lot of adversity; and we still graduate from high school and apply to college. Who would be a better candidate for a scholarship? If we get just a little help, then I think we'll become some of the strongest students and most successful people. I don't see us as risks; I think of us as smart investments.”

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
MERCED STUDENT

## LATINO STUDENT EXPERIENCE

While access to higher education is a key barrier to postsecondary attainment, many states struggle to ensure Latino students complete their degree or credential once enrolled. Compared to their non-Latino peers, Latino learners are more likely to face significant obstacles to higher education, such as [continued financing of their degree](#), [transportation inaccessibility](#), [juggling work, familial, and academic responsibilities](#), and [a lack of sense of belonging](#).

“

As an undocumented person, there are moments when I seriously doubt whether or not I'll make it in the biomedical field. Sometimes I feel alone, but I carry the love of my peers and a passion for liberation in my heart. This fight is bigger than me. I must continue to voice the struggles of undocumented students in unheard places, so that my peers can achieve what I have and more.”

SAN FRANCISCO STATE  
UNIVERSITY STUDENT

## Policy Considerations | Supporting Postsecondary Experiences and Academic Success

- **Increase non-academic supports for postsecondary students.** [The Educational Opportunity Program \(EOP\) at California State University \(CSU\)](#) provides a holistic set of counseling and support services for low-income and traditionally underserved students who attend a school in the CSU system. While the specific services vary by campus, EOP generally provides participants with ongoing advising, tutoring, mentoring, and workshops designed to increase student retention and persistence rates
- **Utilize predictive analytics to keep students on track.** Since 2012, [Georgia State University](#) has leveraged its institutional data to ensure that students stay on track to complete their degrees on time. The institution's GPS Advising system allows GSU counselors to target supportive interventions for students who enroll in courses that do not help them make progress toward their degree, or to those who are underperforming in key courses. GSU has also implemented a number of complementary completion initiatives for students such as the Panther Retention Grants program, which provides small amounts of aid for students who experience some sort of financial emergency that may prevent them from completing their studies.
- **Consider convening key stakeholders to identify policies and practices that may inadvertently impact Latino students.** For example, [a recent report](#) from the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research in North Carolina found that, for students moving between a community college and an institution within the UNC System, the revisions made to the Comprehensive Articulation Agreements (CAAs) increased time to completion for all students. Additionally, CAAs were found to disproportionately impact Black and Latinx students who were less likely to benefit from the transfer of credit and had an average of an additional semester to graduation.



## HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS (HSIs)

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) were developed in the [Higher Education Act of 1993](#) and first received federal funding in 1995. These institutions are public or not-for-profit degree granting institutions and fall into two main categories:

- **Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)** | IHEs with a full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment of at least [25 percent Hispanic students](#) at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application. In 2020-21, there were [559 Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#) across 29 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.
- **Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (EHSIs)** | IHEs with a full-time equivalent undergraduate enrollment of [between 15 and 25 percent](#) at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application. In 2020-21, there were [393 Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#) across 40 states and the District of Columbia.

*Note: For community colleges, enrollment is measured for degree-seeking students.*

However, unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities which were founded with the mission to serve Black students, HSIs and EHSIs receive their designation based on enrollment, requiring [institutional leadership to prioritize support and infrastructure to serve Latino students](#). While HSIs represent only 18 percent of all colleges and universities, they enroll [66 percent](#) of all Latino undergraduate students. HSIs and EHSIs that have embraced their designation as a core tenant of their mission play a critical role in Latino postsecondary attainment. [One study](#) found that HSIs that adequately serve their Latino student population see increased academic outcomes, STEM degree completion, and labor market outcomes. However, the same study found even [more profound nonacademic outcomes](#), such as increased leadership and racial identity development, civic engagement, and critical consciousness. In order to best serve students, [research suggests](#) that IHEs develop student experiences on campus that validate and

## NORTH CAROLINA'S HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTIONS

### Hispanic-Serving Institutions:

- James Sprunt Community College
- Sampson Community College

### Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions:

- Alamance Community College
- Central Carolina Community College
- Durham Technical Community College
- Forsyth Technical Community College
- Johnston Community College
- Randolph Community College
- Salem College (4-year private)
- Surry Community College
- Wayne Community College

positively influence sense of belonging, such as increasing Spanish-speaking engagement, offering mentoring and support programs, including cultural signifiers in their environment, and ensuring policies and practices are developed with Latino students in mind.

## Policy Considerations | Supporting New and Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions

- **Promote eligibility for colleges and universities to gain federal designation.** [Hispanic-Serving Institutions \(HSIs\)](#) provide critical pathways to opportunity, and hundreds of HSIs across our nation are advancing intergenerational mobility, success, and opportunity.

- **Encourage new and emerging HSIs to build capacity to support Latino students through institutional commitments.** To best serve Latino students, new and emerging HSIs must consider how their institution will support Latino students through their mission and vision. One strategy includes [developing institutional commitments](#) specific to serving Latino students, including intentional success metrics and budgetary support.

- **Increase diversity of faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students, as well as engagement with the community to provide representation for Latino students at their institution.** Increasing Latino representation in [faculty population](#) to be reflective of the Latino student body population can serve as a crucial factor for improving Latino student academic progress and success.

- **Build equity-minded leadership practices, policies, curriculum, and co-curricular structures; and institutional advancement activities to generate space and culturally relevant opportunities for students.** This begins with institutions examining [evaluation processes](#) for the principles of transparency, clarity, accountability, context, credit, consistency, flexibility, agency, and representation so they can better serve the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of their students.

- **Improve data collection related to Latino students and implement [evidence-based strategies](#) to increase Latino participation and success.** This can provide opportunities for initiatives and access to be increased and improved based off needs of Latino students.

- **Develop programs to specifically address Latino persistence and retention.** An example is from a Northeastern University initiative, [Latinx Assessing Their Intellect through Networking & Exchange](#) (L.A.T.I.N.X), which empowers students by creating opportunities for identity-based professional development. This initiative provides cultural agility and identity leadership in professional environments while focusing on well-being/self-care, imposter syndrome, and resilience.

- **Recruit Latino students into STEM student success programs using an invitational approach to establish a program for HSIs to increase participation of underrepresented groups in STEM.** For example, the [National Science Foundation's HSI program](#) was designed to enhance the quality of undergraduate science, technology, engineering and mathematics education and to increase the recruitment, retention and graduation rates of students pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree in STEM at HSIs.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

As state policymakers consider what actions they could take to drive progress on policies related to supporting Latino students, they should consider:

- What key obstacles to postsecondary attainment do Latino students in your state experience?
- What federal and state incentives do IHEs have to increase college attainment and completion for the Latino population?
- What challenges are IHEs in your state facing when it comes to supporting Latino students?
- What is your region or state doing to support Latino students? What best practices could be utilized to improve current efforts?
- What is the role of family and community in supporting Latino students and how is this accounted for in current policies?
- Are there existing state funding streams to support Latino students? How does a student's immigration status impact access to these funding streams?

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Hunt Institute is grateful for the insight and guidance that our education partners provided for this issue brief, especially LatinxEd and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Additionally, we extend our gratitude to the John M. Belk Endowment for their support of this initiative.



4000 Centregreen Way | Suite 301 |  
Cary, NC 27513 | 984-377-5200



P.O. Box 891 | Siler City |  
NC 27344 | 919-213-1534

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

College of Education  
Belk Center for Community College  
Leadership and Research

706 Hillsborough Street |  
Raleigh, NC 27603 | 919-515-2238