

Finding your Workforce – Latino Talent for a Global Economy highlights best practices to leverage the high labor force participation rate of Latinos, projected to be one in five workers by 2031. Deborah Santiago with Excelencia in Education discusses the importance of developing stackable credentials, providing transition services, and connecting Latino talent to employers. Get ready to uncover actionable insights, debunk common myths, and discover best practices to reduce skill shortages.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 53



Deborah A Santiago, CEO
[Excelencia in Education](#)

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Transcript of Episode 53

[Opening Jingle and Music]

Debra Santiago: That's part of the American Dream that many of us have, if you've just come to this country, or you've been here for generations. The challenge is making sure we give access to opportunity. Talent is Everywhere. Opportunity is not.

Jasen Jones: Latinos have the highest labor force participation rate and Debra Santiago from Excelencia in Education shows us to how to optimize this workforce in episode 53.

[Jingle] Let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: Thanks for listening. This is Jasen Jones, and we're pleased to welcome Deborah Santiago, co-founder and CEO of Excelencia in Education, America's premier authority on efforts accelerating Latino student success in higher education. The report, *Finding your Workforce – Latino Talent for a Global Economy*, is the focus of episode 53 as we highlight best practices to leverage the high labor force participation rate of Latinos, projected to be one in five workers by 2031. Thanks for joining us, Debra. Given that employers continue to face skill shortages in nearly every labor market across the US, these trends on the Latino workforce look very promising.

Debra: Jason. Thank you for inviting me to join you for this conversation. We've been working with institutions, employers and others where they say they want to reach into and expand their workforce to include more, Latinos so at Excelencia in Education we like to start with, research, with data. And so, Jason, what we try to do is say, okay, what is the current status of Latinos in the workforce and in the education, pipeline and context for us to understand our community? And this first point that you point out that Latinos have the nation's highest labor force participation.

I think initially we were a little surprised by this. We've known this for a while now, but this is not our first time doing this analysis, but the first time we found it out that, it feels like sometimes we're kind of a hidden gem in our workforce environment and that we see this kind of participation is high, but it's often in low wage jobs. And maybe those are not the jobs that get the biggest visibility or awareness or attention. We took that dive looking at overall participation, but then took a look across the labor force and workforce to see where Latinos were represented.

I think the analysis showed us additional information, Jason, that for us really helped make a case to inform and about action, to make sure that building a population is not just overrepresented in participation, but across the workforce, not just in low wage jobs, but also in higher wage jobs as well. And so, for us, the opportunity to say, what's the condition, what's the context, what are people doing? And how do we find ways to connect the dots between the growth of the Latino population, the participation in the workforce, the needs of employers and institutions of higher education and graduate schools to make sure that there's representation across the pathways. That's kind of what guided this analysis and our thinking of how to frame what's possible.

Jasen: We're off to a compelling start, Debra. What are some common myths we should debunk about the Latino workforce?

Debra: Jason, I think the first one that comes up time and again, I'd say there are two. First, that Hispanics are not earning degrees in areas national need. That seems to be common. Folks in engineering or other places, and they couldn't find us. Well, we are getting degrees in engineering, PhDs in engineering and other critical areas in health and others. But we're not necessarily at the same institutions that recruiters often go to. So, if you're going to wonderful schools like Duke, Harvard, or Rutgers, to recruit, you're not necessarily going to see Hispanics earning degrees there. But if you go to University of Texas, El Paso, if you're going to University of Puerto Rico, you're going to find Latinos earning PhDs in mechanical engineering and areas of need. So, I think that debunking that we are not earning degrees is big. And that's one.

The second myth that we often hear is that institutions and students themselves are limited in terms of the degrees that they earn and their value of higher education. So, we often hear at Excelencia that Latino students are making choices in ways that are not advancing their educational experience and that they don't value it. And time and again, we talk to students, families, communities, there is a very high value on earning a college education. That's part of the American dream that many of us have, either just come to this country or we've been here for generations. The challenge is making sure that we give access to opportunity.

We had this wonderful president from the University of Paso, Dan Palacio who is no longer with us, who often would say talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not. And we constantly hear stories of students and families that want to figure out how they can go to college and what they can do to advance themselves. And the families and their community. So, it's not a value-challenge. I think that's a big myth.

It's the system and structure and the opportunities they have to get a college education that we need to help folks with. So, to me, those are two big myths that that excellence in education, we spend a lot of time trying to educate and inform people about that, because I think if you have that myth or that misconception and you start acting on inaccurate information and that has impact on a community.

Jasen: Thank you, Debra. Often in the Ready for Work podcast, we stress the importance of partnerships across categories of the workforce ecosystem. From the demand side perspective of employers, what should be their main takeaways today and how might they close gaps in the near future?

Debra: Jasen, part of what we do in this publication series, we have Funding Your Workforce overall, and then we also have STEM Health and Education. First, we want to start getting employers to know the facts, know exactly where is our community right now. Where are the earning degrees from certificate? Their PhD? And that means maybe reconfiguring a recruitment process instead of going to the same 15, 20 institutions. If you're looking for a well-educated workforce, consider going to the institutions that are disproportionately graduating Hispanics in the areas of interest. We've dealt several times with employers who, as I said earlier, want to know where they can recruit or say we don't exist and they just aren't looking in the right places. So, start there. I think that's relatively basic.

Second, and to your point about partnerships, we know that there are institutions that disproportionately grow and graduate Hispanics across the country and think employers are choosing to partner with those institutions. By partnering, this is not just, make a connection, and make a call and say, I'll be there at your job fair. They're looking to invest in the pathway and pipeline of students who are in that institution who are in themselves as institutions preparing their graduates through experiential learning, internships to prepare them for the workforce. Employers can partner with these institutions to help support and feed that pathway pipeline to the kind of employees that they need and are interested in, but also invest more broadly in the work of an institution that's preparing the workforce that we need for the future.

I think the other two quick areas we put in our research, and this is grounded in talking to employers, is that looking at what happens at institutions post completion, as we call it. Increasingly institutions are becoming more and more aware of the need to not just focus on getting students to graduation, but what happens after the day after they graduate, and taking responsibility for what they need to do post completion. We've seen that employers that look post completion and can support graduating workforce and making sure that they're connected is important. That is somewhat on institutions, but it's also employers to make sure that they're paying attention to what kind of services and strategies, for example, connecting with alumni, because that creates its own network of those who are interested, qualified and able to do the work for an employer.

Then I think the last one is thinking a little bit about what we call and we work with institutions on this kind of scaffolding. We see in the current environment and workforce space that people are having to get retrained and come into fields as AI and other opportunities engage in affecting disproportionately the service industry. It's so critical, the service industry. So, we are seeing opportunities. Our community is looking to get certificates and get back out into the workforce quickly. But how do we scaffold that. An example that I often use, Jason, is that, you get your certificate and you become a home health care aide, so you're in the health care industry. That's a wonderful and important position, especially as more and more baby boomers are retiring and need support. But, it doesn't pay a great wage. How can you get that home health care aide to get

additional certification or associates and become a phlebotomist and make more resources? And then to that phlebotomist, become an R.N. and continue their education while they're employed and working so that they are able to support their families and get the economic investments they need while they're contributing to the workforce and evolving and growing. I think an employer that can see that requires partnership with an institution and a pathway for folks who want to continually, improve, retrain and grow to serve the needs of the community.

Jasen: Debra, I appreciate your attention to the pathway trajectory as individuals go from origin to gateway to destination jobs. How might this framework of partnerships improve how they offer supportive services, transportation, childcare, and others?

Debra: One thing we know of the many things about the Latino community is that engaging in levels of trust is important. Often that stems from working with community-based organization that work with families and communities and trusts the service providers, first and foremost, that their relationships aren't always with the employers or even the institutions of higher education. So, we know the important role of community-based organizations and community services and support.

I'll give you one example of where we see the connection between, all of these. There's a program in Miami-Dade College where they offer industry level certifications, kind of the sub-skills program building stackable credentials in this curriculum. They were partnering with Tesla to create certification that boosts results. Every student who participated in this program became a Tesla technician, 100% job placement rate. But, in order for the individuals to get that certification and engage in that curriculum and consider the potential of a Tesla position, they needed support.

They were working with a local community-based organization in Miami that helped with childcare and transportation, because these tended to be individuals in the community who didn't have support infrastructure that would take the hours to go to class to do certain things, to do the internships to be qualified as a technician, to be eligible. That was beyond the scope of the institution and the employer. And so, this is an example of that we've found, and I think they're more out there today because the Latino community, we tend to work in community and one of trust and rely on each other and service support and their organizations across the country that are doing that. We also work with institutions and employers and say, they're powerful intermediaries because they have the trust of the community if you're going to try and engage in more robust ways. Unfortunately, we've had environments, too, and spaces where, the Latino community has not been as supported by employers and institutions of higher education. That level of distrust has to get mediated. And community services are often the way to do that.

Jasen: Indeed, that ecosystem collaboration can take the pressure off and focus on solutions. One of my favorite questions I like to ask on the podcast, Debra, is what would be on your wish list? If all of the roadblocks could be removed, what would your wish list look like?

Debra: Thank you for that question, Jason. You know, I as I reflect on it, it's sometimes hard to go to three, but I would say first that there are so many evidence-based practices, Jason, that are working across the country and institutions and communities around. But they tend to act in isolation. So one of my first wishes would be that we have a space in a place where we kind of have a good sense of what works, doesn't always translate exactly in every community, but that we invest in what we see is working, that there's evidence of effectiveness in connecting the Latino community to the workforce. This is not rocket science. And to reinvent the wheel every single time. And yet it feels like when people come aware that that's when they start thinking about what they can do. I think we can advance more quickly to accelerate the work of Latinos in

the workforce. If we were able to pay attention to what is working and then figure out how we implemented as we see the need and value of our community. So that, to me, is one.

The second is that employers partner with institutions that disproportionately enrolling, graduating. At Excelencia in education we created this certification called the Seal of Excellence. These are institutions that have with data, evidence-based practice, and leadership, have proven that they are committed to intentionally serve Hispanic students and helping them thrive. These employers, I think, should be going to these institutions in partnership because institutions are investing in the quality of education and the success of these students. They're small, right now, there are only 39 institutions in the country that have earned the Seal of Excelencia. So, my second wish would be, the employers look to these institutions amongst all.

These 39 institutions enroll 10% and graduate 13% of all Hispanics in the country. That's a very concentrated, not just enrollment, but completion. There's a Win-Win opportunity here to take a look at the institutions that are doing more than just enrolling Hispanics, actually serving them. And that serving includes post completion and the workforce elements that these students need. So that would be the second.

I think the third is that we pay attention. I think we want to make sure that Latinos are represented across the workforce from blue collar jobs and to white collar jobs to highly professional jobs around. And I do think that the opportunity for there to be a focus on stackable credentials that continually invest in our community and allow us to see what's possible is big.

Over 40% of Hispanics that go to college are the first in their family to go to college. That's higher than any other group. That means that college knowledge can be limited and sometimes the occupational opportunities that stem from it can be limited. They might not know that getting a degree in math you can be an actuary and earn lots of resources, lots of opportunity there or other fields. It's not just 2 or 3 fields, you get a degree in this and then you do that work. For me, the opportunity, because so many of our community that are in currently low wage jobs need to see the pathway and potential to higher paying jobs, livable wages and opportunity is, let's meet them where they're at.

If they are currently getting a certificate of six months because they need to work, let's create a structure and support around them and get them to enter the workforce. In this challenging environment when we have a dearth of the workforce that we need, let's meet this Latino community, all communities, where they're at, and be a partner with these communities in ways that advance into to higher wage, livable wages so that this community can flourish and that all of our communities can flourish. To me, that would be the third one. Let's meet them where there at and create a pathway for individuals and communities that goes through the education experience. Because to get a higher living wage, we know we need a college education.

Jasen: Your approach makes this easier to understand from a human-centered design perspective. As we near the end of our time together, Debra, how should our listeners connect with Excelencia in Education to learn more?

Debra: You can certainly go through your search engine. We'll go in effort to find Finding your Workforce, Tapping Latino Talent, and that might be one way. Again, we have a series of information here. We have multiple publications and efforts. Go to our website at [www dot E D E X C E L E N C I A dot org](http://www.edexcelencia.org). As you know our name is Excellencia in Education. Excellencia is a great cognate. It means excellence in Spanish. And so our website that's at edexcelencia.org you will find resources, opportunities, the institutions that I referred to that are educating and,

Preparing the Hispanic community for the workforce. You can get contact information there, all that's available. You can send an email to us at contact@edexcelencia.org if you would like to do that.

I'm very grateful that we have a long-standing partnership with ACT and your team. I'm confident that given the critical work you're doing, if folks reach out to you all directly that given our partnership that you all will be in touch with us. And I just want to be realistic that they know this podcast, they know the community. We will always be connected to you all. And I know that our partnership remains strong, that they reach out to you to be able to reach us.

Jasen: We appreciate that partnership, Debra, connecting and convening ecosystem leaders with this desire to optimize the workforce. The research from Excellencia in Education is compelling and offers us a blueprint for impact.

Debra: Jasen, thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it and look forward to continued discussions, engagement, and more importantly, the action that's needed to make a difference for our community.

Jasen: *Finding your Workforce – Latino Talent for a Global Economy* and the research we covered today is linked in our show notes for episode 53.

[Podcast Closing and Jingle] Thanks for listening to the Ready for Work podcast from your friends at A C T. Join us at [Work Ready Communities dot org](http://WorkReadyCommunities.org) as we link, level up, and leverage for workforce ecosystem prosperity. Subscribe today in your favorite app and check out our full library at [A C T dot org](http://ACT.org), slash, ready for work podcast for past episodes, show notes, resources, and much more.