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Increasing number of Hispanics completing higher education

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A record number of Hispanics earned degrees and certificates at Texas colleges and universities in 2005, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

The board reported Thursday that the number of Hispanics completing undergraduate degree and certificate programs increased 47 percent during the past five years from 21,087 in the fall 2000 to 31,091 in the fall 2005.

Officials said they'd like to see the number of degreed Hispanics continue to rise. Hispanics make up the state's fastest-growing ethnic group, and education is key to earning income, they said.

"It's good to see the increase, but it should be higher," said David Gardner, the board's assistant commissioner for academic excellence and research. "The base was low to begin with."

Officials attributed the growth partly to the fact that more Hispanics are attending the state's four-year colleges and universities. Many of those students start out at community colleges.

The coordinating board reported that the percentage of Hispanics receiving associate degrees and certificates awarded by two-year colleges has grown twice as fast as the percentage of those earning bachelor's degrees at four-year institutions.

Steve Murdock, the state's demographer and a professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio, said the level of education is the best predictor of income.

According to the most recent data, 35 percent of white Texans had a college degree, while less than 9 percent of Latinos had one.

"It's a clear need that our non-Anglo students be competitive," Murdock said.

Eric Gonzales, A University of Houston student who expects to graduate this spring with an economics degree, said he's not surprised more Hispanics are working toward degrees.

"I know once I get my degree I'll have career options," he said. "I won't be limited and forced to take something I don't want."

Statewide, white students still continue to graduate in greater numbers. About 60 percent earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting college, while Hispanics had a graduation rate of 40 percent and blacks roughly 35 percent.

Information from: Houston Chronicle, <http://www.houstonchronicle.com>