



Commentary

September 2026

**UT Austin's Hispanic-Serving Designation: More Enrollment Than Service**  
**By I. Cruz, LTPC Fellow**

September 26 will mark six years since UT Austin received its Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation, and Latino students, researchers, stakeholders, and Texas's broader higher education community are already asking whether the promise has been kept. The answer, multiple data sources suggest, is no.

While Latino students at UT Austin are graduating at rates proportional to their enrollment, their educational achievement is a testament to their agency and resilience in an academic institution that does little to support them. Six years into its HSI designation, UT Austin has conflated enrolling Latino students with intentionally serving them. Serving Latino students is a different story. In fact, UT Austin's overcompliance with Senate Bill (SB) 17 has dismantled the very infrastructure built to retain Latino students. Enrollment gains are objectively hollow if UT Austin is simultaneously undermining the support systems students need to persist and graduate college.

**Enrolling Is Not Serving**

HSI scholar at UC Berkeley's School of Education, Dr. Gina Ann Garcia, distinguishes between an HSI that enrolls Latino students and one that actively serves them. [Servingness](#) is measured by student belongingness, racial-ethnic identity affirmation, indicators of cultural congruity on campus, and structural investment in Latino student success. By these measures, UT Austin has fallen short. When former President Jay Hartzell created the Presidential HSI Steering Committee in 2021 in response to the university's new HSI designation, the move appeared to signal an institutional commitment to Hispanic-serving initiatives. That commitment proved short-lived when [the HSI Steering Committee discreetly ceased meeting by spring 2024](#), the same year SB-17 (i.e., Texas's ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] programs in public universities) took effect. Ceasing to meet exceeded what SB-17 required of the university, revealing how fragile UT Austin's institutional commitments to Latino students remained when confronted with the state's political

pressure. UT Austin went further by eliminating DEI offices, including the Division of Campus and Community Engagement and the Multicultural Engagement Center.

### From Designation to Retreat



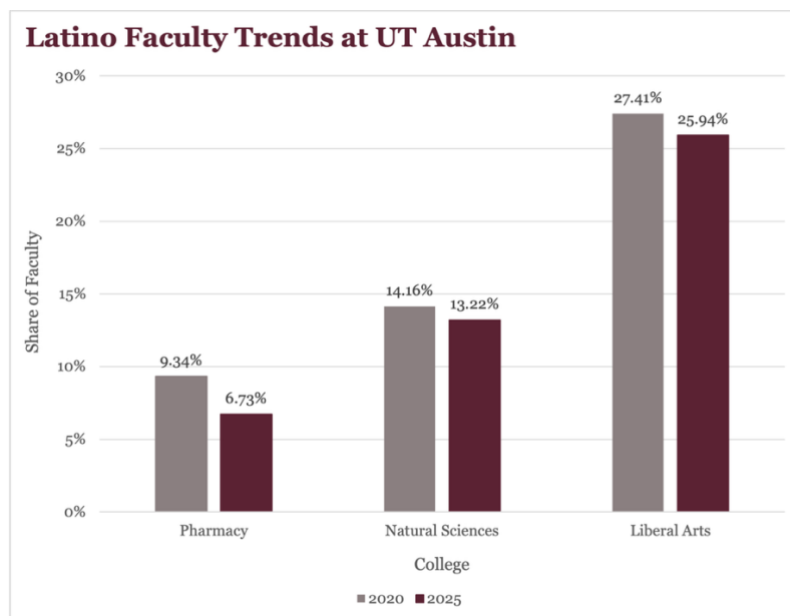
*Six years from designation to retreat.*

### The Cost to Students

The structural retreats wrought by [UT Austin's administration carried tangible consequences for Latino students](#), whose educational success are central to the university's obligations as an HSI. Professor Karma Chavez, chair of UT Austin's Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies, has argued that [the university's expansive interpretation of SB-17 has inflicted harms well beyond those mandated by the law itself](#), fostering a climate of uncertainty about which forms of support remain permissible. Moreover, Latino students have felt the effects of that uncertainty directly. Reflecting on the closure of the Gender and Sexuality Center, UT Austin student [Monica Sanchez described it as "the ultimate place of belonging."](#) Such losses are not merely symbolic. For Latino students navigating what developmental scientist Drs. [Alan Meca](#) and [Seth Schwartz](#) describe as "cultural stress," the institutional conditions that undermine campus belonging, ethnic-racial identity, mental health, life satisfaction, and academic persistence, the dismantling of campus third spaces erodes the support structures that make retention and degree completion possible for Latino students, calling into question the university's commitment to the students its HSI designation was meant to serve.

Similarly, the consequences of UT Austin's structural retreat are evident in the university's diminished capacity, or willingness, to cultivate future Latino faculty. Nothing illustrates UT Austin's institutional failure more concretely than [the story of Dr. Daniel Acosta](#). A 1968 UT pharmacy graduate, Acosta became the college's second Latino professor and later served as deputy director of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Toxicology Center. After retiring, he spent more than four years attempting to establish a \$100,000 endowment to support Latino doctoral students pursuing academic careers at UT, the very faculty pipeline an HSI might be expected to strengthen. In November 2025, both UT and Texas Exes declined the gift. UT spokesperson Mike Rosen stated that SB-17 prevented the university from accepting

the scholarship. Texas Exes, however, is not subject to SB-17 and declined the proposal as well. Employment lawyer Kell Simon told the *Austin American-Statesman* that no legal barrier prevented UT Austin from accepting the endowment. “They’re scared,” Acosta concluded. “They didn’t know what to do.” The episode is particularly striking given broader trends within the institution. Since UT’s designation as an HSI in 2020, the share of Latino faculty in the College of Pharmacy fell from 9.3% in 2020 to 6.7% in 2025. Smaller declines also occurred over the same period in the two colleges with the highest student enrollment: Natural Sciences (27.4% to 25.9%) and Liberal Arts (14.2% to 13.3%). At a university that continues to identify itself as Hispanic-serving, the rejection of an effort to expand the pipeline of Latino faculty raises difficult questions about what an HSI designation means in practice.



*Latino share of faculty declined in the Colleges of Pharmacy, Natural Sciences, and Liberal Arts faculty from 2020 to 2025.*

## A Statewide Stake

[Latino Texans comprise over 40% of the state’s population](#), yet the state’s flagship university is steadily dismantling the curricular and institutional structures designed to support Latino students. UT Austin’s decisions reflect broader shifts across the higher education landscape and are part of a wider national retreat from diversity initiatives. [From the Supreme Court’s rejection of affirmative action](#) to executive actions targeting DEI programs and a broader institutional rollback of diversity programming, a pattern of retrenchment has become increasingly visible. The question, then, is whether an HSI can claim to serve a population while simultaneously abandoning the mechanisms through which that service is made possible. For a state whose future is increasingly Latino, the consequences extend beyond UT

Austin, shaping the educational pathways that determine access to opportunity and full participation in civic and professional life across Texas.

### **The Legislature Set a Baseline**

Critics may argue that UT Austin had little choice. SB-17 may have left UT Austin with no viable path forward, and that blame belonged with the Texas legislature rather than the institution itself. This objection deserves serious consideration. SB-17 is a sweeping and punitive law, and the political pressure accompanying it has intensified in the last two years since it took effect. However, the evidence suggests that UT Austin's response has consistently exceeded what the law required, a choice with statewide weight given its flagship status. UT professor Liliana Garces, who studies the impact of SB-17 on Texas, has observed compliance standards more restrictive than what the law mandated. When universities remove all mention of race, eliminate diversity offices, and decline scholarships that fall outside SB-17's stated reach, they are making choices that deepen existing educational inequities for Latino students who were navigating an uneven playing field. As Garces argues, [color-neutral policies fail to create neutrality](#), despite institutional claims to the contrary, and instead reproduce the educational inequities they purport to eliminate. While SB-17 is a sweeping and punitive law, the legislature set a baseline. UT Austin chose to go lower.

Latino students cannot and will not be reduced to a statistic of representation in assessments of HSI status. Servingness implies an institutional obligation to actively construct the conditions of belonging, persistence, existence, and future possibility. That is what servingness demands. That is what HSI designation promises, and what UT Austin has yet to deliver.