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Latinos and College Access: Trends and Future Directions

President Barack Obama has called education “the economic issue of our time”, explaining that the rise in unemployment among those without a college education is growing and eight of 10 new jobs created in the US are more likely to hire people with higher education degrees (Obama 2010). Indeed, change is what our educational system needs to increase opportunities to access higher education for Latino students who are among the most underrepresented racial groups in higher education. Latinos are the largest non-white ethnic group in the United States, estimated to comprise 15.4 percent of the population, and are growing at a much faster rate than the rest of the nation (US Census 2008a). Latinos’ youthful presence is visible in our nation’s public schools with Latinos projected to comprise 25 percent of all students in enrolled in US public schools in 2025 (President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans 2000).

This demographic shift is associated with a widening gap in college enrollment between Latino and white students. Unfortunately, this association is often mistakenly interpreted as a causal relationship between being Latino and not going to college. In reality, there are discernible differences in schooling experiences between students who enroll in college and those that do not. The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of trends in Latinos’ educational pathways to higher education, highlight barriers to a baccalaureate degree and provide suggestions for increasing access to higher education for Latino students. Access to higher education is a broad research field, so emphasis is placed on specific emerging issues that merit the attention of practitioners: transferring from community college, gender differences in college enrollment, access to financial aid, and undocumented students.

National Trends

According to the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau 2007), only 12.7 percent of all Latino adults have a baccalaureate degree compared to 30 percent of whites. To be sure, there has been an increase in college enrollment among Latino youth between 1980 and 2000 from 16 percent to 22 percent (Llagas and Snyder 2003), yet in the same period, white student enrollment increased even more, from 27 percent to 39 percent. The result is a persistent and widening gap in college enrollment and attainment between Latinos and whites. The college enrollment rate is exacerbated when comparing community college enrollment between whites and Latinos. While the increase in college enrollment for whites in the past two decades can also be characterized by a shift from community college to four-year college¹ enrollment, increases in enrollment for Latinos are largely due to increases in community college enrollment (Fry 2005). Latinos are more likely to attend community college (42 percent) compared to whites (24 percent) (Fry 2002). There are some costs associated with enrolling in community college instead of four-year

college, such as taking longer to graduate from a four-year college or not transferring to a four-year institution (Ornelas 2002). The low college enrollment and skewed distribution of enrollment into community college is the consequence of disparate educational experiences between white and Latino students.

Many factors contribute to the widening gap in college enrollment between Latino and white students. One of the clear barriers to college attainment is the alarmingly high school dropout rate among Latinos; only 54 percent of US educated Latinos complete high school (Greene 2001, Rumberger and Rodríguez Forthcoming). Compared to whites, Latinos are also less likely to take a college prep curriculum in high school and take advantage of financial aid opportunities. Further, the increasing underrepresentation of Latino males, among all Latinos enrolled in college, contributes most to the college enrollment disparity between Latinos and white students.

California Trends

Latinos comprise 36.6 percent of California’s population (US Census 2008b). With respect to college access and achievement, attainment trends mirror national patterns and present a unique stage from which to illustrate Latinos’ representation in the various tiers of higher education. California offers three publicly subsidized higher education systems: 112 community colleges, 23 California State Universities (CSU) and 10 Universities of California (UC). Each tier of higher education has defined eligibility requirements ranging from an open admission policy at community colleges to course and test score requirements at CSUs and UCs. As the eligibility requirements become more selective, Latino participation narrows. California has the nation’s largest network of public higher education institutions, yet Latino enrollment in the public higher education system does not reflect the state’s racial/ethnic population (Table 1).

¹ Four-year college in this article refers to baccalaureate granting institutions.

Table 1: Despite comprising 36.6 percent of California's population, Latinos are underrepresented in California's public higher education system.

Latino Enrollment 2008–2009 Academic Year		
California Community Colleges (total enrolled)	California State Universities (undergraduates enrolled)	Universities of California (undergraduates enrolled)
29.6% a	25%b	15.7%c

Sources: a) California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (2009)
b) California State University (2008) and c) University of California (2008)

Transferring from Community College

Latino students are more likely to attend community colleges (Ornelas 2002). In fact, community college students comprise half of all Latino students in undergraduate education (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans 2000, Rendón, Jalomo and García 1994). Community colleges can be an important pathway to the baccalaureate degree in part because they offer lower tuition and evening classes that may be more appealing to working students. Yet, despite 71 percent of Latino community college students expressing interest in transferring from community college to obtain bachelor's degrees, only seven to 20 percent² of Latinos transfer to four-year colleges and universities (Solorzano, Rivas and Velez 2005, US Department of Education 2001). Unfortunately, even those that remain in community college do not necessarily complete an associate's degree. Of all associate's degrees earned in 2001, only 10 percent went to Latinos while 72 percent were earned by white males (Villalpando 2010). Multiple factors contribute to poor retention and transfer rates for Latino community college students. For example, the increasing cost of attending four-year institutions has slowed access for many students. Another challenge students face in the transfer process is the misinformation about transfer requirements resulting in students taking too few or too many courses that do not count towards the requirements (Rivas, et al. 2007). Many schools also lack a *transfer culture* (Ornelas 2002), a campus effort to increase opportunities to learn about transfer requirements through academic advising mentoring, and tutoring. Nonetheless, community colleges continue to be important pathways to higher education for Latino students. In fact, between 1990 and 2000, Chicana/o students were more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to have attended a community college en route to obtaining a Ph.D. (Rivas, et al. 2007).

Preparation for Higher Education

Preparation for higher education eligibility begins early in one's schooling. However, due to de facto segregation and unequal

resource allocation, Latinos have distinct and inferior school experiences (Ginorio and Huston 2000, Moreno 1999, Valencia 2002). Scholars researching California schools have found that schools with disproportionately high Latino and African-American enrollments are more likely to have less prepared teachers, fewer supplies and poor facilities (Oakes 2002). As a result, students have fewer opportunities to prepare for college.

Consider access to advanced courses, for example. A student who participates in a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program in elementary school is more likely to be placed in honors courses and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school (Gonzalez, Stoner and Jovel 2003). However, in the Los Angeles Unified School District where Latino students comprise the majority of the student population, Latino students are less likely to be enrolled (Burciaga, Perez Huber and Solorzano 2010) in these advantageous courses, because large schools serving high proportions of students of color do not offer as many Advanced Placement (AP) courses as schools serving large white students (Solorzano and Ornelas 2002, Zarate and Pachon 2006). In addition to providing better learning opportunities, AP courses are important for college preparation because they give students the advantages of adding one percentage point to their overall grade point average (GPA) and often provide them course credit in college.

Diverging Gender Trends

For the past three decades, Latinas are enrolling in college (Freeman 2004, Ginorio and Huston 2001, Lopez 2009) and graduating from college at higher rates than Latinos (Freeman 2004, KewalRamani, et al. 2005, Peter and Horn 2005). In 2004, 28 percent of college age Latinas were enrolled in college compared to 22 percent of Latinos. (KewalRamani, et al. 2005). This college enrollment gap has continued to increase since it became evident in the 1980s, from .1 percentage point difference to six percentage points in 2004 (KewalRamani, et al. 2005). These differences are even more apparent when examining undergraduate enrollment—63 percent of all Latinos in college are female (KewalRamani, et al. 2005).

There are several plausible explanations for the expanding college enrollment gap between Latinos and Latinas. Perna (2004) offers the explanation that there are higher salary returns for girls who receive a college education compared to boys and that is why more Latinas choose to enroll in college than Latinos. However, studies have found differences in learning and schooling experiences as early as elementary school. Porche, et al. (2004) account for some differences in literacy performance by family socialization practices,

² This broad range can be attributed to limited data on student transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions. When accessible, this data is difficult to compare across schools (Villalpando 2010).

such as parents reading to Latina girls more frequently than to boys (Freeman 2004). Early literacy and language acquisition, in turn, positively explain college enrollment outcomes for Latino boys, and not Latina girls (Zarate and Gallimore 2005). On the other hand, Latino boys in elementary school use computers more frequently and perform better on math assessments than Latina girls (Freeman 2004).

Yet, something occurs after the initial years of schooling where boys develop different occupational aspirations and expectations from girls in high school (Cook, et al. 1996). There is evidence that differential schooling experiences between Latinos and Latinas may explain different school engagement levels. For example, Latinos are suspended and retained at higher rates than white males and are more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities (Freeman 2004, KewalRamani, et al. 2005) and experience bullying in school than white students (Freeman 2004). Other than sports and hobby clubs, Latina girls are more likely to participate in after-school activities than Latinos (KewalRamani, et al. 2005) and participation in extracurricular activities has been found to play a prominent role in determining college predisposition for Latinas (Hamrick and Stage 2004). Latina girls are more likely to interact with school agents and benefit from those interactions than Latino boys (Gandara 1995, Gonzales et al. 2003, Zarate and Gallimore 2005). The lack of teacher-student interaction among Latinos may contribute to Latino boys' disengagement from school (Suarez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2004, Osborne 1999). These different schooling experiences contribute to Latinos having the highest drop out rates in high school (Freeman 2004) and while these rates have gradually decreased for Latinas in the past three decades, dropout rates for Latinos have remained unchanged (Freeman 2004).

However, all of these relationships are correlational at best and research has yet to understand the differences between boys' and girls' schooling experiences. Several qualitative studies reveal parents and families of college-bound girls, despite parents' non-college educational attainment and unfamiliarity with college admission processes, reinforce high educational aspirations and provide emotional support (Ceja 2001, Gandara 1995, Gonzales, et al. 2003, Talaveras Bustillo 1998). Unfortunately, these in-depth case studies have not included Latino boys in their sample, limiting what can be said about why some Latinos do not go to college.

Access to Financial Aid

Financial aid information is critical for Latino students. Decreasing federally-funded college subsidies, increasing families' share of higher education costs (Callan 2000, Dowd 2006, Orfield 1992,

Gladieux and Perna 2005), low-income status and low educational attainment levels in many Latino families (US Census Bureau 2004, US Department of Education 2003), and the established underutilization of federal financial aid opportunities among Latino students (Santiago and Cunningham 2005) makes improving financial aid access as important as increasing college access. The shift in college financing has placed a college education out-of-reach for many working-class families and may be limiting students' college choices, less they graduate with very high levels of debt. St. John and Noell (1989) found that Latino and African-American students responded positively to financial aid offers, more so than white students. However, the impact of how financial aid is structured, i.e. grants versus loans, is not well understood due to limited research with appropriate controls for family socioeconomic status (Dowd 2006). It is likely that financial aid instruments have different impacts depending on the family's socioeconomic status. It is also very likely that some students may be dismissing some college options before applying to those colleges due to the perception of lack of financial aid. Thus, their decision is not captured in analyses of accepted students.

Indeed, one consistent finding in research about financial aid information among Latino families is that the lack of college financial aid knowledge may be influencing decisions to apply to college. Flint (1992) was also able to link parents' financial aid awareness to an expansion of college choices, but research has mostly focused on confirming the wide financial aid information gap present among Latinos families. Post (1990), Flint (1992), Zarate and Pachon (2006), and Luna De La Rosa (2006) have documented the lack of financial aid knowledge present among Latino students, parents and low-income students. In a national survey, Zarate and Pachon (2006) found that Latino parents and students lacked significant information about financing college and often received information much too late to be able to consider attending college. Additionally, although both parents and students expected to receive such information from school personnel, very few received timely information from schoolteachers or counselors.

Undocumented Students

An emerging and urgent issue to address in the realm of college access is the growing undocumented population among Latino students who cannot access higher education legally or financially because they do not qualify for financial aid from government agencies. It is inherently difficult to know the precise proportion of Latino students that are undocumented but studies using census estimates have placed the number of undocumented school age children at close to 1 million (Fix and Passel 2003). Every year, approximately 65,000 undocumented students graduate from

high school after having completed at least five consecutive years of schooling in the US (Gonzales 2007).

Some states have addressed this growing sector of the population by allowing undocumented students with evidence of US residency and school enrollment to pay in-state tuition at state colleges and universities. Unfortunately, proposed national legislation, commonly known as the DREAM Act, granting higher education rights to undocumented youth has not successfully passed. In states where undocumented college students can pay in-state tuition college enrollment among foreign-born Latinos has increased (Flores and Chapa 2009). In California, 18,000 undocumented students are enrolled in community colleges and 1,650 are enrolled in four-year public state colleges and universities (Batalova and Fix 2006). This is significant considering the hurdles that students must surpass to enroll in college.

Surprisingly, one of the major hurdles reported is the lack of information about students' rights and access to in-state tuition programs (Chavez, Soriano and Olivarez 2007). If undocumented students are able to navigate the application process for admission to college, they then face the difficult challenge of financing college (Chavez, et al. 2007). Undocumented students are not eligible for federal or state grants and loans and thus must self-finance their education or seek scarce private scholarships—and even this process is laden with technical and legal misinformation (Olivas 2009).

From the little we know about undocumented students in college, it is certain that their social networks with peers and with isolated school teachers and counselors are critical sources of information and support to access college (Martinez-Calderon 2009, Perez 2010). Paradoxically, while higher education is very elusive for undocumented students, schools and colleges are also some of the safest spaces where they can engage in mainstream activities and be legitimate members of a mainstream institution (Abrego 2008, Martinez-Calderon 2009)

Future Directions

As President Obama's administration pursues educational reform, there is much to consider for improving educational opportunities and college enrollment for Latinos. There are several considerations that we suggest practitioners and their associations and schools can prioritize when considering how to increase college enrollment among Latinos.

1. McDonough (2005) has documented the large student case-loads (e.g. over 700 students per counselor) of urban high school counselors, making it difficult to effectively

disseminate college admission and financial aid information to all students. Alternative solutions, such as using para-professionals, must be considered so that students can access their counselors easily and in a timely manner.

2. High school teachers are prime, currently underutilized, conduits of college preparation, admission and financial aid information. By instilling expectations that all teachers are college and career advisors, and properly training teachers, students will have more options from where to seek college and financial aid information.
3. School counselors serving large undocumented populations should be expected to be thoroughly familiar with the college admission options available to undocumented students. The college advising culture of the school should be such that undocumented students can openly solicit assistance to enroll in college.
4. It is unclear why Latino boys are not doing as well as girls and we propose that more in-depth studies of the different schooling experiences in elementary and middle school be undertaken to understand these trends.
5. Schools, school districts and county offices of education have tremendous opportunities to approach change through regular program assessment and revision. Using school-specific data can help pinpoint areas of focus for improving college preparation opportunities at each school.
6. Community colleges looking to improve transfer rates for students who aspire to attend a four-year college need to implement a standard transfer curriculum.
7. All high schools should make college preparatory curriculum the standard course offerings. This will eliminate confusion or misinformation about which courses prepare students for college admission.



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