

**First Generation Latino College Students:
Institutional Practices that Support Four-year College Degree Completion**

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Abstract

Although college enrollment of Latino students has increased over the last decade, this group still lags in attainment of 4-year college degrees. Only 14.5% of Latinos aged and 25 and older had earned a bachelor's degree in 2012 (Lopez & Fry, 2013). Greater educational attainment for Latinos is of significance as levels of educational attainment are associated with quality of life, lifetime earnings, and the country's economy in terms of the overall capacity of its workforce. This brief, based on literature about Latino college success and Latino college student retention, finds that four-year institutions that make a commitment to retaining their first-generation Latino students have higher graduation rates than the national average for these students. To foster Latino college completion, these institutions recognize and respond to these students' unique needs by institutionalizing Latino-specific initiatives through providing funding for them within the schools' operational budgets, by developing systems of integrated support, and by fostering inclusive campus climates.

Keywords: Latino educational attainment, Latino college student retention, Latino college success, Latino educational success

The Importance of Latino College Completion

While there is a trend of increased college enrollment of Latino students, this group still lags in terms of obtaining 4-year college degrees (Lopez & Fry, 2013). In 2012 only 14.5% of Latinos aged and 25 and older had attained a bachelor's degree (Lopez & Fry, 2013). With over 12 million Latino children one in four K12 public school students in the United States already in the educational pipeline (Hernandez, Murakami, Cerna, Medina, & Martinez, 2013), it is imperative that institutional commitments to students guide practices that support Latino students, many of whom are first-generation college students, by addressing their distinct needs to increase retention and college completion. Without improving college completion for Latinos, the largest ethnic group in the U.S. will suffer both in terms of not meeting its ideal of equity and in the impact on the country's overall economy in terms of the capacity of its workforce, as Hispanics will make up a greater share of the American workforce in the coming decades (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2013). This brief aims to highlight practices that increase the likelihood of retention degree completion of Latino first-generation college students.

Overview of the Problem

An increase in the percentage of Latino students enrolling in college does not equal greater retention and completion. Latino college students face complexities that distinguish their needs from those of other college students (Reyes & Nora, 2012). Concern over finances may be intensified by students' family responsibilities, and working many hours to contribute economically to their households stifles their ability to pay for school (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004). On average, Latinos are also more likely than other students to be

first-generation college students (Saenz et al., 2007 in Reyes & Nora, 2012), and to attend high schools that are under-resourced, which results in them being less prepared for college in terms of information as well as academics (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Additionally, positive cultural climate has been found to be a greater indicator of success for Latinos than traditional predictors such as a student's high school grades or standardized test scores (Hurtado, 1996 in Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004). As colleges consider and respond to these needs of their enrolled first-generation Latino students, through their practices, they can increase the likelihood of college graduation and subsequently contribute to both increasing equity, ensuring fairer access of opportunity and better life conditions for all, while also preparing students to meet the needs of the workforce required to maintain a stable economy.

Recommendations: Commitment to Latino Success

Without institutions recognizing the circumstances of their Latino first-generation college students and making a long-term commitment to support these students, it is less likely that this subgroup will successfully complete the path to four-year college completion. In general, four-year institutions, both public and private, with Latino graduation rates above the national average also have higher completion rates for all students (Lynch & Engle, 2010). These institutions demonstrate a commitment to success for all by meeting equity aims while attaining high achievement through institutionalizing initiatives and integrating academics, support, and personal development. They also foster inclusive, supportive environments for their Latino students. Institutions that have greater success than the national average in graduation rates can serve to inform other institutions that choose to make equity and achievement a part of their mission.

Financial Considerations

Colleges' financial responsibility to underrepresented students must go beyond initiatives supported by grant funding and should strive to be institutionalized as part of colleges' operational budgets (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Additionally, providing targeted financial assistance to admitted Latino students offers help to students to navigate and to be able to continue schooling (Best Colleges, n.d.; Reyes & Nora, 2012). Furthermore, considering the additional obstacles for students with undocumented status who are also first-generation students, school officials can seek out funders who can provide private scholarships to help aid these students who are not eligible for federal or most state financial aid, and can advocate for policies that offer in-state tuition rates to those with undocumented status in order increase access to further education (Flores, 2010; Santiago & Galdeano, 2015). Institutionalizing initiatives geared toward first-generation Latino college students, providing targeted financial aid, seeking funding for and advocating for policies that reduce financial barriers for students with additional financial obstacles due to their immigration status, sends a message of commitment and understanding of the circumstances of these students across campuses.

Systems of Integrated Support

Consistent support for students from acceptance into a four-year institution through graduation is a key component of ensuring college completion. Without a broad plan of integrated efforts, institutions are more likely to offer only pockets of support for students rather than to serve them in an effective manner that fosters academic, social, and professional success (Santiago & Galdeano, 2015). Programs that ease first-generation Latino students' transition to college, especially when students have not had previous preparation, aid them in feeling comfortable accessing and using on campus academic and social support systems, thereby promoting increased retention and completion (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Additionally, for

students in need of additional academic supports, offering accelerated format remedial courses ensures that students do not lose time in their academic programs while strengthening academic skills (Santiago & Galdeano, 2015). Tracking students' progress and providing integrated support services for students is essential in college completion (Santiago & Galdeano, 2015). When students start to fall behind, progress systems notify advisors and professors so that they may intervene and link students with appropriate support services (Lynch & Engle, 2010). These types of approaches, which emphasize communication between offices and develop faculty student relations, help to strengthen students' on-campus support networks and encourage students' sense of belonging (Reyes & Nora, 2012).

Fostering a Climate of Inclusivity

Schools that promote Latino-specific initiatives such as cultural and social clubs and professional organizations, the presence of Latino/a or Chicano/a programs and departments, and targeted efforts to reach out to these Latino/as (Best Colleges, n.d.; Reyes & Nora, 2012), establish climates that promote a sense of belonging and support for their first-generation Latino students. Interactions within organizations, and on-campus activities further help to integrate students to college (Reyes & Nora, 2012) and those that bring Latino students together offer them opportunities to form relationships with peers pursuing common interests, further strengthening their networks. Embedding cultural curriculum, through planning instruction that builds on student knowledge (Kanel, 2004), and through ethnic studies courses, affirms Latino and other traditionally underrepresented identities (Garcia, & Okhidoi, 2015). For White students, research on ethnic studies courses has shown positive impact on outcomes related to democracy (Sleeter, 2011), potential to reduce racial bias, and it improves attitudes in general about diversity (Chang, 2002 in Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Furthermore, offering Latino/a or Chicano/a studies courses as options for fulfilling general education requirements strengthens

the institutionalization of these departments (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). When institutions integrate cultural components within their curricula, they not only promote Latino students' level of activity at the institution, but also in their communities, as their sense of agency and engagement increases (Sleeter, 2011).

Conclusion

To fulfill the ideal of an equitable society as well as to maintain economic stability, four-year institutions must enact practices that take a holistic view of Latino first-generation college students to foster Latino college completion. Colleges that view first-generation Latino student graduation as an institutional responsibility develop practices that respond to the distinctive characteristics of Latino students compared to other students within college populations. They view their Latino students as an asset to the school and therefore invest in them, and affirm their identities through institutionalized practices. In turn, as students experience the ability to access services, navigate college, and feel a sense of belonging on campus, they mentor students like themselves (Benmayor, 2002), strengthening these students' opportunities for success. For first-generation Latino students, this sense of support and connection fosters four-year college completion. Greater educational attainment for this group is of significance to these students and their families, as higher levels of educational attainment are associated with higher quality of life, including increased lifetime earnings, increased satisfaction, and health (Levin, 2009). For the United States, Latino four-year college completion rates impact their ability to enter the workforce and to be fully engaged in society, which will serve determine the country's economic and social wellbeing (Levin, 2009).

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