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Siguiendo Tu Sueno “Chasing Your Dream”: What Research Says about Barriers and Supports to Latino Student Community College Persistence

By 2018, it is estimated that nearly two-thirds of new jobs created in the U.S. economy will require workers to pursue education beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). According to a recent report from the Lumina Foundation for Education (2010), only 37.9% of the American adult population currently holds a college degree or credential. To address this gap, President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative challenges states to contribute to the goal of helping 5 million additional Americans earn college degrees and certificates by 2020 (Obama, 2009). Community colleges have been identified as the “gateway to good jobs and a better life,” emphasizing the important role that these institutions fill in providing college access and job retraining (Obama & Biden, 2010). In addition, this initiative provides increased resources to Community Colleges through state efforts to assist Americans in receiving training and the credentials needed to be job ready.

Illinois has accepted this challenge, participating in programs such as Complete College America and Race to the Top, signaling the state’s commitment to improve college access and success for Illinois residents. The inequity in high school graduation for Latino students creates a disparity between the dream of earning a college credential and college access. For Latino students, the dream of college is unlikely to be realized. In Illinois, 57% of Latino students graduate from high school compared to 83% of White students (Advance Illinois, 2010). Many Latino students, who graduate from high school, are underprepared to make the transition to postsecondary education. Only 8% of Hispanic students that do graduate are considered college ready, meaning their ACT composite score is greater than 21 (Advance Illinois, 2010). As a consequence, many of these students begin their higher education at community colleges where they receive developmental education to prepare them for college-level course work.

Looking nationally, about 2 million Latino students’ ages 18–24 enrolled in colleges across the country (Lopez, 2009), and a disproportionate number of these students (58%) enroll in two-year institutions (Piedra, Schiffner & Reynaga-Abko, 2011). Latino’s make up 25% of 18–24 years olds enrolled in two-year colleges (Fry, 2011; Fry & Lopez, 2012). In Illinois, during 2010, Latino students made up 16.6% of all students enrolled in community colleges, with an associate’s degree completion rate of 12% compared to 21% overall in the state (Illinois Community College Board, 2010).

Lagging behind in associate degrees received compared to other ethnic groups, there has been an increased emphasis placed on narrowing the achievement gap through improved programs and policies (Complete College America, 2011). A lack of college aspiration is not the barrier to success for Latino students but rather the lack of preparation and access to college opportunities. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (Lopez, 2009), nearly 88% of Latino high school student’s surveyed agreed that college credentials are necessary for upward mobility. Similarly, 77% of these high school students indicated that they believe this sentiment is shared among their parents, indicating familial support for the decision to pursue a college credential (Lopez, 2009).

To that end, if most Latino high school students and their family members recognize the need to attain college credentials, then the barriers to success and degree completion need to be determined and resolved. Higher education institutions should consider what prevents Latino students who enroll in community colleges from succeeding in transfer to the baccalaureate. This brief provides an overview of pre-college, institutional, and environmental factors shown to influence Latino student transfer and baccalaureate degree completion. The article also offers several practices to assist Latino students through the community college pipeline to the baccalaureate degree level.

Barriers

Empirical studies have cited overarching barriers to degree completion including pre-college, institutional, and environmental factors. This section of the article briefly introduces each influence on degree completion.

Pre-College Factors

Arbona and Nora (2007), studied college degree attainment among Hispanic students, and found that student's background characteristics such as demographics, skills, and attitudes influence their achievement and college persistence. Furthermore, they found that Hispanic/Latino students who began at a community college and transferred to a four-year institution shared the same pre-college characteristics with Hispanic or Latino students who began at a four-year institution. This includes completing a rigorous high school curriculum and early intention to enroll and complete a bachelor's degree. English proficiency and academic preparedness have also been studied as pre-college barriers to degree completion or transfer for Latino students (Hagedorn, Cypers, & Lester, 2011; Piedra et al., 2011). These studies confirm that students who demonstrated lack of English proficiency are often placed in developmental courses, and enrollment in these courses tends to delay time to degree completion as well as decrease the self-efficacy of students who are repeating similar courses that were taken in high school (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012).

Institutional Factors

When studying college experiences that promote persistence among community college students, Barnett (2010) found that higher levels of academic integration strongly predicted higher levels of persistence. Integration refers to shared attitudes, values, and experiences that shape how students make meaning out of what they are learning and how they see themselves within an academic or social environment (Rendon, 1994). Academic integration includes performance in the classroom and connections with faculty and staff. Barnett's study shows that, when students are meeting the requirements of the institution, they are more likely to feel like a valued and contributing member than when they are unable to meet institutional expectations (Barnett, 2010). This finding was particularly relevant to Latino students who expressed intent to return to college for the following semester.

Studies conducted by Rendon and others (see, for example, Rendon et al., 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007) who emphasize validation by faculty as an influence on Latino student persistence and success support the previous findings. Faculty validate students' academic potential by offering verbal encouragement, helping with coursework after class, and exhibiting patience to students who speak English as a second language.

Latino students who enroll full time and attend college continuously show higher levels of persistence than students who attend and enroll sporadically (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Nakajima et al. (2012) found that 70% of students who did not persist were enrolled part-time, compared to 29% enrolled full-time. Factors that may contribute to part-time enrollment and persistence include full- or part-time work and family responsibilities.

Latino students experience barriers to course progression that delay transfer from two-year to the four-year degree programs of study. Barriers to creating a convenient course schedule, lack of information about transfer policies, lack of understanding about students' cultural needs and poor academic advising have been found to impact the ability of Latino students in urban community college settings to transfer (Hagedorn et al., 2011). In their study of urban community college students, Hagedorn et al. found that the majority of students took classes on weekends and evenings when access to academic advising was non-existent.

Environmental Factors

When studying minority student retention in community colleges, Rendon et al. (2011) found several shared characteristics of Latino students who found it difficult to be socially and academically integrated within the community college. Environmental barriers such as family responsibilities and working off campus keep students away from connecting with faculty and staff, and peers outside of the classroom. Arbona and Nora (2007) demonstrated that Latino women who reported taking care of a family member were 83% more likely to leave college than others without the same responsibility.

Students who struggle with integration on campus tend to seek outside support; however the support they receive may not lead to persistence. Family responsibilities or struggles balancing school with off campus employment may draw students away from educational pursuits. The more hours a student works off-campus, the less likely they are to persist. Arbona and Nora (2007) found that students who rely on employment outside of the campus community were 36% more likely to stop out from an academic program.

Recommendations

Many variables impact the persistence and success of Latino students, and this brief discussed a few pre-college, institutional and environmental factors shown to influence Latino student transfer and baccalaureate degree completion. There are several practices to assist Latino students through the community college pipeline to the baccalaureate degree level. Institutional practices such as:

1. *Connecting students with on-campus jobs* to help them meet financial needs in an environment that is supportive to their learning needs and goals (Nakajima et al., 2012). *Offering alternative times (e.g., nights and weekends) for academic services such as advising* to help students to connect with staff to obtain advice about coursework, career opportunities, and transfer policies (Hagedorn et al., 2011).
2. *Providing emotional support services through culturally-sensitive counseling and mentorship programs* to help students make successful transitions as well as to promote social integration by providing an environment in which they feel welcomed and valued (Crisp & Nora, 2009; Piedra et al., 2011).
3. *Providing opportunities for students to connect with faculty outside of class time* (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Barnett, 2010) helps them learn campus values and, build personal connections to academic groups on campus, which ultimately contributes to persistence.
4. *Integrating campus academic support services into developmental coursework* helps students build partnerships between support services and coursework. This enhances awareness of the needs of students who encounter barriers that place them at high-risk for dropping out of college, allowing support services professionals to anticipate and proactively address students' needs (Nakajima et al., 2012).
5. *Providing faculty and staff training on diverse student needs in the community college setting* offers resources to support students in a culturally-relevant way. Furthermore, it encourages new ways of thinking about how institutional practices and structures can be shifted to reduce barriers to student success (Rendon, 1994).

Research demonstrates that Latino students and their families believe in the value of an education. Yet, institutional and structural inequalities, often encountered in early education experiences, place Latino students at a considerable disadvantage for accessing and succeeding in higher education environments. Community colleges have traditionally served as

an entry point for these students. These institutions are well-positioned to continue offering job retraining and education credentialing opportunities that not only help individuals build lifelong skills, but that also strengthen local and national economies in ways that are called for by efforts such as the American Graduation Initiative. However, institutional and policy transformations, such as those recommended in this article, are needed to help Latino students achieve their potential – to turn their dreams into reality.

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