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An Overview of Transfer Conditions: Exploring Latino Community College Students in Texas

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This paper begins exploring the transfer conditions for Latino community college students in Texas. We provide an overview of the high school schooling conditions for Latinos; the experiences of Latinos in the community college; and some models that can increase the transfer and graduation rates for Latina/o community college students.

Overview

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2013), as of 2012, Latinosⁱ constituted approximately 17% of the total U.S. population (53 million), making them one of the fastest growing groups in the country. Within the K-12 system, Latino students represent the largest minority population in the western (41%) and southern (21%) regions of the U.S. (NCES, 2013). Latino students are also the largest language minority group in the U.S., comprising approximately 80% of English Language Learners (ELLsⁱⁱ) in the country (Kindler, 2002). In a Latino policy and issues brief published by UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center, Yosso and Solorzano (2006) revealed that out of 100 Latino students who begin at the elementary school level, 54 drop out or are pushed out of high school, and only 46 graduate. In considering these alarming statistics of Latino high school graduation, it is important to discuss the high school context as a starting point to community college transfer.

High School Schooling Conditions

To explain the effects of schooling conditions, Yosso and Solorzano (2006) cited unequal K-12 schooling conditions, such as students attending segregated and overcrowded schools with poor maintained facilities, as some of the major reasons for the lack of academic and educational success within the Latino student population. In addition, many Latino students are ELLs with different sets of non-academic and academic challenges to the schooling experience. In their research on the achievement of ELLs in California, Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan (2003) found that one of the major challenges in the schooling of ELL students is that they are more likely to be taught by teachers with an emergency credential. Not to mention, these teachers often do not have access to adequate professional development opportunities to support the instructional needs of their ELL students (Gándara et al., 2003).

Academic Experiences

Opportunities to learn as an ELL student are largely dependent on the policies and practices in each academic institution. Looking at the entire ELL student population in a Northern California high school, Callahan (2005) discovered that ELLs were overwhelmingly enrolled in lower-track academic courses. These courses were disadvantageous to ELLs since they limit students' exposure to rigorous content and conversations, which are more likely to prepare them for higher education (Callahan, 2005). For example, language differences in college-prep science classes reveal that hands-on activities such as lab work, experiments, and active exploration are customary learning opportunities for non-ELLs; whereas, ELL college-prep science classes are primarily lecture and textbook based (Callahan, 2005). Finally, Mosqueda's (2010) analysis of a subsample of 2,234 first-generation Latino immigrants and U.S.-born second and third generation Latinos in the 2002 Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) revealed that tracking has a negative effect on mathematics achievement of both Latino native and non-native English speakers. Considering that math test scores for Latino, ELL students are considerably lower than English proficient students and native English speakers, the implications for tracking ELL students pose severe long-term consequences.

Once Latino students graduate from high school, they are less likely to start off at a four-year university, and more likely to begin higher education at a community college (Kurlaender, 2006). For Latino students, NCES (2013) data indicate that 46% of all Latino students in U.S. higher education are enrolled at a community college. In the fall of 2012, NCES (2013) reported Latinos were the second largest group enrolled in community colleges, representing 20% of the student population. Although Latinos are more likely to enroll in community college, Latino transfer rates to a four-year university continue to be disproportionate amongst all transfer students (The National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2011).

In the context of Texas, 53% of students choose community college as their entry point into higher education (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), 2013). Additionally, 25% of students who start community college eventually transfer to a four-year institution within six-years (THECB, 2014). The most recent report showed that only 14.10% of all community and technical college students entering as First-Time Entering Undergraduates (FTEC) during the fall of 2008, graduated in six-years (THECB, 2008b). Furthermore, within the Latino student population, 63% of Latino students in Texas choose community college as an entry point into higher education. Unfortunately, the majority of FTEC Latino community college students leave without obtaining a degree (THECB, 2008a).

The Community College Experience

Latino Student Characteristics

Today, community colleges are the largest post-secondary education segment in the U.S., enrolling 47% percent of the undergraduate student population (Handel & Williams 2012). In her study describing the diversity of the student population in U.S. community colleges, Malcom (2013) revealed that community college students are more likely to be first-generation college students, low-income students, and adult learners. More so, over 60% of Latino students in postsecondary education begin their college careers in the community college, but less than 1%

transfer to a four-year college or university (Yosso & Solorzano, 2006). There are multiple factors leading to Latino students enrolling in community colleges versus a four-year university. Nora and Rendon (1990) examined student transfer behaviors and attitudes measured across five categories—student background, initial commitments, social integration, academic integration, and predisposition to transfer; their results revealed significant implications for community colleges. Nora and Rendon's (1990) research emphasized that over 50% of Latino community college students considered attending community college because it was more affordable, they wanted to stay close to home, they wanted to be able to take self-improvement or enrichment courses, and because they wanted to be able to work while going to school in their hometown.

Notably, Latino students who are enrolled in community colleges maintain high educational aspirations. A study on the experiences of Latino students who transfer from the California Community College system to California State University or University of California indicate that 40% of entering Latino students aspire to transfer to a senior institution and earn a bachelor's degree (Rivas, Perez, Alvarez, & Solorzano, 2007). Similarly, when compared to white (70%) and black (68%) transfer students, Bailey, Jenkins, and Lainbach (2007) have noted that 79% of Latinos aspired to transfer, earn a bachelor's degree, and pursue a graduate degree.

Academic Barriers

Latino community college students have many barriers that may interrupt, delay, or keep them from transferring from community college to a four-year college or university. In an exploratory study, Suarez (2003) analyzed the factors contributing to the forward transfer of Latino community college students. She discovered that one major barrier affecting Latino community college students is their overrepresentation in remedial English courses, which limited their opportunity to participate in transferable English courses and decreased the likelihood of transferring to a four-year university. Similarly, Alexander, Garcia, Gonzalez, Grimes, and O'Brien (2007) used ethnographic methodologies, primarily participant observations and case studies, to examine transfer barriers experienced by Latino and Latino immigrant students in the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD). Conclusions from Alexander et al. study demonstrated the importance of Latino student enrollment in college prep courses throughout high school as way to prevent future enrollment in remedial courses at the community college.

Non-Academic Barriers

Non-academic barriers also impact the transferability of Latino community college students. For example, Latino language minority students' face barriers in the transfer process as soon as they are transitioning from high school to the community college. Bunch and Endris' (2012) conducted thorough research on testing and placement processes of U.S. linguistic minority students in California during the transition from high school to community colleges, using state policy documents, website analysis of 25 California community college, multiple interviews, and five site visits. Their multi-dimensional research revealed that students are not provided with adequate information regarding English as a Second Language and English course sequences, and more specifically, regarding the instructional models used in the courses and the utility of the courses for specific certificate, degree, or transfer requirements.

Researchers Ornelas and Solorzano (2004) used a case study research design to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups with students, counselors, faculty, and administrators to examine the barriers faced by Latino students in the transfer process and evaluated the resources available to address student academic motivation. The results of Ornelas and Solorzano's (2004) case study highlighted two key barriers to transfer: the absence of institutional commitment to implement and fulfill the transfer function, and an absence of adequate transfer information. For Latino students in the DCCCD two relevant non-academic barriers included having limited financial aid resources, which either prolonged transferring or prevented the pursuit of an education. Research has also suggested that Latino students experience cultural and social disconnect upon transferring to a four-year institution, since many institutions are predominately white, whereas the community college was likely to be more diverse (Alexander, et al., 2007).

Finally, Latino community college students also encounter social and cultural challenges to the four-year transfer experience. In their policy brief addressing the Latino transfer gap, Nuñez and Elizondo (2013) echoed Ornelas and Solorzano's (2004) findings and made the following suggestions regarding Latino students and their relationships with community college: build relationships with community college faculty and staff, provide access to critical information about how to navigate the community college/four-year university systems, and ensure that the community college is an affirming and welcoming environment for students with similar backgrounds.

Building a Transfer Culture for Latino Community College Students

Given the schooling and educational experiences of Latino community college students, there are several researchers and practitioners who have developed affirming transfer culture models in an effort to eliminate institutional barriers and strengthen the transfer function from community college to four-year universities (Handel 2012; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011; and Pérez & Ceja, 2010). These models address some of the structural, social, and academic barriers Latino community college students may face during the transfer process. To highlight some of the most promising practices supporting the transfer of Latino community college students, we have included the following examples of transfer culture models and their components. Handel (2012) formulated the Emerging Transfer Culture Model, as a way to systematically identify and provide the necessary resources for students to transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree from two-and four-year institutions. Handel (2012) explained that the transfer-affirming culture has five elements:

- 1) Envisions transfer as a shared responsibility between community colleges and four-year institutions.
- 2) Views transfer and attainment of the bachelor's degree as expected and attainable.
- 3) Offers curricula and academic support services that make transfer and degree completion possible.
- 4) Leverages the social capital that students bring to college in service to their educational goals.
- 5) Includes transfer as an essential element of an institution's mission and strategic vision (p. 416).

Latino scholars have also addressed this issue and have made recommendations to develop a Latino transfer culture. In their study, Pérez and Ceja (2010) provided an overview of

existing information related to transfer objectives and Latino transfer rates. Pérez and Ceja (2010) used their research, as well as previous scholarship, to outline a Latino transfer culture model. Pérez and Ceja's (2010) framework included seven components that would make an immediate impact to the schooling and educational experiences of Latino students:

- 1) High school, community college, and university faculty and staff should reflect the Latino student population. Latino role models and mentors who mirror the students provide invaluable resources that reveal college attendance, transfer, and graduation are possible.
- 2) Educational partnerships should connect middle schools with high schools and high schools with higher education institutions to begin preparing Latino students early for college. This includes focusing on improving academic skills. Strengthening 3R (i.e., writing, reading, and arithmetic) subject matter, and providing necessary college and financial aid information preferably in small learning communities. This type of strategy would also give students the tools necessary to enroll directly from high school to some form of higher education.
- 3) College and universities must streamline their articulation agreements. These agreements are not limited to community colleges to state system transfer requisites but also include individual community college to university requirements necessary for transfer into a specific discipline.
- 4) College outreach programs should be culturally responsive and ought to reflect the specific needs of the Latina/o student population they serve. Such programs would promote college attendance and transfer while instilling in participants a sense of pride in their heritage.
- 5) Higher education institutions need to prioritize and fund outreach programs, practices, and partnerships that facilitate transfer. Part of this funding should be set aside for program evaluation and assessment for constant improvement. An additional related recommendation includes embarking funding for a higher education administrator whose sole responsibility is to coordinate appropriate constituencies and support student transfer.
- 6) Incentives ought to be provided to higher education institutions that support transfer through evidence-based practices such as an increase in the rate of students maintain continuous enrollment, or a decrease in the rate at which students drop classes, or an increase in the percentage of students who complete an orientation program/course.
- 7) Financial need-based scholarships must be available for Latina/o students at the community college and 4-year institution. Such scholarships would increase the possibility that students can maintain continuous enrollment, attend full-time, and perhaps reduce work hours (pp. 16-17).

We feel these are essential elements to eliminate structural, social, and academic barriers Latino community college students may face, increasing their transferability from community college to four-year universities.

Implications

The purpose of this paper was to explore the Latino community college conditions. Current research confirmed the academic, social, and institutional barriers Latino students experience through the educational pipeline. Given the apparent disproportionate enrollment

rates of Latino students in community college and those who eventually transfer to and graduate from a four-year university in Texas; we argue that continuing a critical conversation about this topic is important for at least three reasons: 1) the limited amount of research that exists on community colleges as institutions of higher education, and in particular, studies that document the lived experiences of Latino community college students who navigate the community college pathway into higher education; 2) the disproportionate rate of Latino community college students who transfer to four-year higher education institutions; and 3) the lack of achievement and attainment in higher education, which has resulted in both a loss of talent to U.S. society and a loss of important role models for the next generation of Latino students who aspire to educational and professional careers (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005, p. 277). It is our hope that this paper will contribute to the expanding body of research on transfer conditions for Latino community college students in the U.S.

José R. Del Real Viramontes is a doctoral student in the Cultural Studies in Education Program in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. His research focuses on issues around success for Latinas/os in community college and at the Four-year University as transfer students. Prior to beginning his doctoral degree, José earned a B.A. in Chicana and Chicano Studies and an M.A. in Curriculum & Instruction with a focus on Cultural Studies in Education.

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Mike Gutierrez He recently completed his Master's in Education with a specialization in College & University Student Personnel Administration (CUSPA). His research interests include: student development/success initiatives, social justice, first generation students, low-income students, underrepresented students and achievement levels of Latino and other students of color at the college/university level. Prior to completing his master's Mike earned a B.A. in Psychology.

Juan Lopez, is a first year masters degree student in the Higher Education Administration department. Juan is pursuing a Masters of Education with a specialization in College and University Student Personnel Administration (CUSPA). His research focuses on Chicano/Latino male dropouts and how being an English Language Learner is attributed to these drop out rates in the K-16 pipeline. Prior to beginning his degree, Juan earned a double major in Chicana and Chicano Studies and Political Science with a concentration in American Politics and a minor in Education.

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Suggested Readings

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ⁱ For the purposes of this paper the authors use the term Latinos when speaking about Latina/o community college

ⁱⁱ In this paper ELL refers to English Language Learners or an active learner of the English language. This term is used mainly in the U.S. to describe K-12 students.