DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 836 RC 022 762

AUTHOR	Moreno, Susan E.
TITLE	U.S. Latinos and Higher Education.
INSTITUTION	Inter-University Program for Latino Research.
SPONS AGENCY	Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.; General Motors Corp., Detroit, MI.
PUB DATE	1998-12-00
NOTE	6p.; Also funded by the National Hispanic Scholarship Fund.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Information Analyses (070)
JOURNAL CIT	IUPLR Briefing Papers; v1 n6 Dec 1998
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Affirmative Action; College Students; *Educational Attainment; Educational Environment; Educational Trends; *Enrollment; *Higher Education; *Hispanic American Students; School Holding Power; *Student Adjustment; Student Alienation; Student Financial Aid
IDENTIFIERS	*Latinos

ABSTRACT

Over the last 20 years, the college enrollment rate of Latino high school graduates has dropped dramatically in comparison to that of non-Latino Whites. Among college graduates, the only category in which Latinos earned a degree at a higher rate than non-Latino Whites was at the associate's degree level. Latinos have nearly reached parity with non-Latino Whites in the earning of bachelor's degrees, but Latinos have lost ground in the rate of master's degrees they earn. At the doctoral level, despite some earlier gains, Latinos have again lost ground to non-Latino White men. Finally, the overall educational attainment rate for Latinos has remained low. In fact, relative to non-Latino White men, Latinos have lost ground in their overall educational attainment over the last 20 years. California and Texas, where the two largest Latino populations live, have effectively eliminated affirmative action programs through Proposition 209 and Hopwood v. University of Texas, thereby restricting Latino access to higher education. The decline in student financial aid since the early 1980s has also negatively affected access to higher education. Latinos have difficulty adjusting to college because of their relatively lower representation among college student populations, discrimination, lack of university social networks, and lack of validation of their educational worth from faculty and family. Recommendations include facilitating Latino transfers from 2-year to 4-year institutions, improving Latinos' adjustment to college through mentors, and increasing financial aid. (Contains 30 references.) (TD)

IUPLR
INTER-UNIVERSITY PROGRAM for LATINO RESEARCH

Vol. 1, No. 6

Briefing Papers

U.S. Latinos and Higher Education

By Susan E. Moreno

Susan Moreno is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on race and ethnic relations in the field of education. For her dissertation, she is analyzing whether college students' friendships are associated with their academic performance in calculus. She has just finished coauthoring two articles. "Success and Diversity: The Transition through First-Year Calculus in the University" is in review and "Supporting Minority Mathematics Achievement: The Emerging Scholars Program at the University of Texas at Austin" is in print with the Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering. Moreno earned a Masters of Education degree in counseling from the University of Houston and a Bachelor of Science degree in Applied Mathematics from Texas A&M University.

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The University of Texas at Austin
P.O. Box 8180
Austin, TX 78713-8180
Tel: (512) 471-7100
Fax: (512) 471-4545
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U.S. Latinos and Higher Education

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LATINOS ARE A RELATIVELY YOUNG POPULATION, GROWING FAST, AND WILL BECOME, ACCORDING TO THE U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, THE LARGEST POPULATION GROUP IN THE COUNTRY BY THE YEAR 2050.[1] IF ONLY FOR THIS REASON, POSITIVE STEPS MUST BE TAKEN TO ASSURE THE SUCCESSFUL PROGRESS OF LATINOS THROUGH THE EDUCATION PIPELINE, MEASURED BY IMPROVED COLLEGE COMPLETION RATES. LATINO EDUCATION, THEREFORE, IS VITAL TO THE NATIONAL INTEREST OF THE U.S. NOW AND IN THE FUTURE. LATINOS ARE A VERY YOUNG POPULATION GROUP, WITH A MEDIAN AGE OF 26.7 YEARS, AS COMPARED WITH 35.5. YEARS FOR NON-LATINO WHITES, BASED ON 1993 CENSUS DATA.[2] TWENTY-ONE PERCENT OF THE U.S. LATINO POPULATION WAS 9 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER, AS COMPARED WITH 14 PERCENT FOR NON-LATINO WHITES IN 1993.

Education is key to upward social mobility in the United States. Latinos, however, often trail behind other U.S. population groups in educational attainment. Of particular concern is the Latino population's participation at the postsecondary education level. The rapidly evolving economy of the United States relies more and more on a workforce that possesses high-technology skills that require at least some college training. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer Latinos participate at each rung of the educational ladder.

As a result, the growing Latino population, coupled with the changing demands of the U.S. economy, make it imperative that Latinos enroll in and graduate from institutions of higher learning if they intend to influence and participate in the future of this nation. Following is a brief summary of Latinos' higher education status, focusing on three areas: their higher education trends, their access to higher education, and their adjustment to college life. Finally, recommendations are suggested to improve Latinos' higher education completion rate.

Higher Education Trends

Latinos have made some progress in higher education over the years, but they have not come close to attaining equal standing with non-Latino whites, particularly white men. In this section, we will examine fall enrollment rates, degrees conferred, and the educational attainment rate of Latinos and Latinas as compared with those of white men.

Enrollment

Over the last twenty years, the college enrollment rate of Latino high school graduates has dropped dramatically. In 1994, Latino high school graduates enrolled in college at a rate 24 percent lower than that of non-Latino whites. In comparison, Latinos' 1976 college enrollment rate was 8 percent higher.

A number of reasons may explain the dramatic change in Latinos' college enrollment. One is that Latinos have the highest high school dropout rate in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education estimated in 1994 that 30 percent of Latinos 16 to 24 years old had dropped out of school without earning a diploma. During the same period, 8 percent of non-Latino whites and 13 percent of African Americans had dropped out.[3] The dropout rate for Latinos has not significantly changed over the years.

Latinos who graduate from high school and

enroll in college are a special group. Yet Latino high school graduates do not always meet the requirements to be admitted into universities, particularly flagship, research institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 1992 Latino high school seniors indicated that they were in college preparatory programs at a rate 33 percent below that of white students.[4] This point is further illustrated by the fact that only 10 percent of the Latinos in Texas' 1996 high school graduating class scored on the SAT or ACT at a level high enough to be admitted into college.[5] Thus, fewer Latinos are eligible to enroll in universities because of a high dropout rate, and among those who do graduate, fewer meet college admissions requirements.

The fact that the number of Latinos who enroll—as compared with non-Latino whites—has fallen dramatically since the 1970s makes it even more imperative that Latino college students complete their higher education. Data on Latino college students' enrollment patterns by level surprisingly show that at the undergraduate level Latinos' enrollment rate was 8 percent higher than that of non-Latino whites in 1994, and this pattern has remained steady over the years (see Figure 1). Taking a closer look at the data, however, reveals that this is due to the high representation of Latinos in two-year institutions.

The 1994 enrollment rate for Latinos in two-year institutions is 51 percent higher than that of non-Latino whites. Latinos' enrollment rate in four-year institutions—which include undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs—was 30 percent below non-Latino white students' four-year institution enrollment (see Figure 2).[6] Thus, the higher Latino undergraduate enrollment rate is largely due to their very high enrollment in two-year, associate degree programs.

Larger discrepancies in Latino college student enrollment patterns exist at the graduate and first professional degree level, with Latinos falling well behind non-Latino whites. At the graduate level, Latinos enrolled at a rate 50 percent lower than non-Latino whites in 1994. (In 1976, Latinos enrolled at a rate 56 percent lower than non-Latino whites.) Over the years, the enrollment of Latinos in first professional degree programs has stayed at a rate close to 60 percent lower than that of non-Latino whites (see Figure 1).

Degrees Earned

While enrolling in college-level programs is important, actually earning a degree is imperative if U.S. Latinos expect to advance. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Latino students enrolled in college for the first time during the 1989–1990 school year earned bachelor's degrees by Spring 1994 at a rate 35 percent lower than that of non-Latino white students.[7] This suggests that Latinos, already underrepresented in their college enrollment, continue to be underrepresented among college graduates.

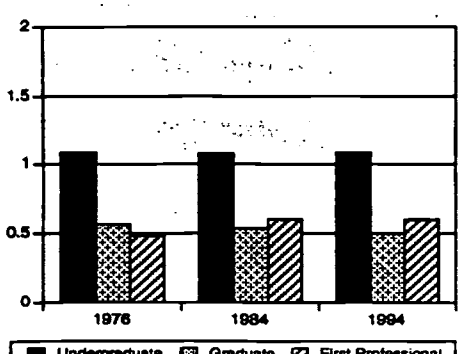
Among college graduates, Department of Education data reveal that between 1976 and 1994 the only category in which Latinos earned a degree at a higher rate than non-Latino whites was at the associate's degree level.[8] For example, in 1993, Latinas earned associate degrees at a rate 51 percent higher than non-Latino white men, while Latinos earned associates degrees at a rate 40 percent higher.[9]

An encouraging sign is that Latinos have nearly reached parity by earning bachelor's degrees at a rate comparable to that of non-Latino white men. In the 1993–1994 school year, Latinas earned bachelor's degrees at a rate 8 percent lower than non-Latino white men and Latinos earned bachelor's degrees at a rate 7 percent lower. These statistics, coupled with the number of associate's degrees Latinos earn, imply that Latinos are not well represented in earning degrees at higher educational levels.

Over the years, Latinos have lost ground in the rate of master's degrees they earn. In the 1976–1977 school year, Latinas earned master's degrees at a rate 13 percent lower than that of non-Latino white men. During that same year, Latinos earned master's degrees at a rate 19 percent lower than that of non-Latino white men. In a disturbing trend, by the 1993–1994 school year Latinos and Latinas were both earning master's degrees at a rate 24 percent lower than that of non-Latino white men.

At the doctoral level, despite some earlier gains, Latinos have again lost ground to non-Latino white men. The rate of doctoral attainment for Latinos and Latinas peaked during the 1986–1987 school year. That year, the Latina graduation rate was 52 percent of non-Latino white men's graduation rate, while Latinos graduated at 81 percent of the rate for non-Latino white men. Yet by the 1993–1994 school year, the doctoral graduation rates for Latinos and Latinas had dropped dramatically to 46 percent and 60 percent, respectively, of non-Latino white men's graduation rate.

FIGURE 1



Latino College Enrollment by Level
Ratio as a Percentage of non-Latino Whites' Enrollment
(1 = Equality with non-Latino Whites)

Latinos are approaching parity with non-Latino white men in earning professional degrees, earning 89 percent of that for white men. Latinas, however, still struggle to gain some ground on white men in earning professional degree. In the 1993–1994 school year, Latinas earned professional degrees at a rate 49 percent below that of non-Latino white men.

Educational Attainment

Finally, the overall educational attainment rate for Latinos has remained low. The number of Latinas 25–29 years old completing four-year college degrees had increased to 9.8 percent by the 1993–1994 school year—up from 4.8 percent in 1976. This is still far below the rate for non-Latino white men. That year, Latinas' educational attainment rate was 60 percent lower than that of non-Latino white men (see Figure 3).

Latinos, meanwhile, have actually lost ground in their overall educational attainment. During the 1976–1977 school year, the rate of Latinos with four or more years of college was 60 percent lower than the rate for non-Latino white men. By the 1993–1994 school year, that figure fell to 71 percent below the rate for non-Latino white men.[10]

Latino Subgroups

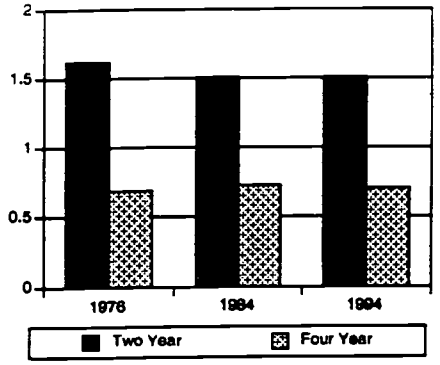
So far Latinos have been discussed as a homogenous group. It is important to remember, however, that among Latino subgroups educational differences exist that may affect any comparison of educational achievement with that of non-Latino whites. Cuban Americans have the highest levels of education, while Mexican Americans, the largest Latino subgroup, have the lowest. Puerto Ricans and Central/South Americans fall in between these two groups. For example, among Cuban Americans 25–34 years old, 25 percent had earned at least a bachelor's degree, as compared with 27 percent of non-Latino whites, 10 percent of Puerto Ricans, and only 6 percent of Mexican Americans.[11]

Access to Higher Education

Affirmative Action

Social mobility in the United States means having true access to higher education. In recent years, several developments threaten to stymie Latinos' access to higher education. The passage of Proposition 209 in California and the resolution of the court case known as *Hopwood v. University of Texas* have effectively eliminated affirmative action programs at educational institutions in these states, where the two largest Latino populations in the country live. These developments will have devastating effects for Latinos, particularly Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.

FIGURE 2



Latino College Enrollment by Institution Type
Ratio as a Percentage of non-Latino Whites' Enrollment
(1 = Equality with non-Latino Whites)

Colleges and universities have attempted to revise their admissions criteria to avoid considering race or ethnicity as a condition of enrollment. Some of the proposed changes include using socioeconomic status, which may give Latinos more access to higher education. Continuing to heavily consider high school grades and standardized test scores, however, without considering race and ethnicity will work against Latino students who, on average, earn lower grades and test scores than non-Latino white students. Further, it is highly likely that as the number of Latinos who enroll in higher education drops, so will the number of Latinos who graduate.

Financial Aid

Another issue affecting the access of Latinos to higher education has been the decline in student financial aid. Since the early 1980s, government-secured educational loans have become the primary source of financial assistance for students, even from the lowest socioeconomic levels, according to a report issued by the President's Advisory Committee in 1996.[12] In the meantime, the purchasing power of the federal Pell Grant has dropped as the cost of higher education has increased. These trends have left Latinos—often among the poorest of college students—faced with the dilemma of trying to improve their educational and economic standing with fewer financial resources.

Latinos, in general, are less likely to take out loans for their education and, therefore, are more likely to work to help pay their school expenses. Often this leaves them with less time to spend on schoolwork and forces them to enroll in fewer classes. Inability to more fully concentrate on their education can extend the length of time it takes for a student to graduate. Additionally, taking longer to graduate increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of college altogether.

Two-Year Institutions

When it comes to the Latino population's access to higher education, two-year institutions are in a particularly precarious position. More than 50 percent of Latinos enrolled in higher education attended two-year institutions in 1994, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.[13] Such institutions have opened the door to higher education for many Latinos. Unfortunately, there have been low transfer rates between two- and four-year institutions, especially for Latinos.[14] Thus, two-year institutions do not appear to be stepping up to the plate to provide Latinos true access to higher education. Rather than providing Latinos with access to pursue education at four-year institutions, two-year colleges may stress vocational programs that lead to low-level, dead-end jobs.[15]

Adjusting to Higher Education

As with all college students, Latinos must adjust to the university/college environment. For Latinos, however, this can be particularly difficult because of their relatively lower representation among college student populations. Research shows that transition and adjustment to college is easiest for Latinos who have earned higher grades in high school, come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and attended integrated high schools.[16] Once in college, Latinos more readily adjust when they experience little discrimination, have active university social networks, and receive validation of their educational worth from faculty and family members.[17] In some cases, Latinos who deny their ethnicity find it easier to adjust to college,[18] while others find that actively embracing their Latino heritage helps their adjustment.[19] The perception that a university environment is hostile negatively impacts a Latino student's adjustment to college.[20]

Successfully adjusting to college life tends to increase the likelihood of earning a degree. Pre-college experiences that help Latinos stick with college include participation in "gifted and talented" programs and/or attendance at more highly integrated schools.[21] Gifted and talented programs give Latinos better access to teachers, high-achieving peer groups, and the type of positive reinforcement students need to succeed.[22] In integrated high schools, Latinos have access to "cultural capital" and knowledge needed for college success—much of which comes from access to white students and teachers.[23]

Latino college students who are least satisfied with their campus experience and who feel the most alienated are less likely to graduate.[24] Part of this negative experience may stem from having a limited understanding of the university environment, leading to missed opportunities.[25] For Latinas in particular, limited access to financial aid, a job that requires having to work long hours, a lack of mentors outside of the family, and a loss of self-confidence are all negatively associated with staying in college.[26]

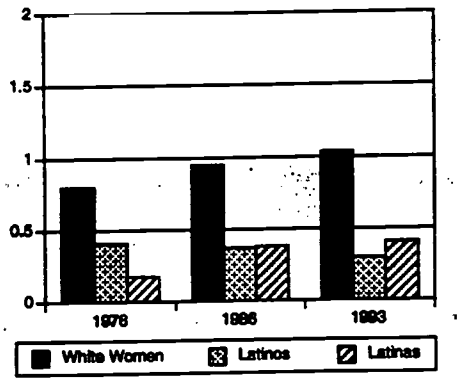
Adding to their difficulties, Latino students often come from families in which they are the first to attend or graduate from college. If their parents have little formal education, such students enter college with little knowledge of how to navigate the higher education system. Nevertheless, Latino students often emphasize the support they received from their parents for their own academic success.[27]

For many Latino families, the goal of higher education is to attain economic security.[28] Thus, while Latino parents may not have been able to actively participate in their children's college education because of a lack of knowledge of the higher education system, they still supported their educational efforts.

Recommendations

Improvements in two areas would increase the college graduation rates for Latinos. First, since Latinos are largely found in two-year institutions, efforts must be made to increase their transfer rate to four-year institutions rather than stress earning only a associate's degrees. Four-year institutions should develop articulation agreements with two-year institutions so that students and counselors know exactly how their courses will transfer. The actual transfer process, in terms of applying for admissions and financial aid, should be easier. These changes will help both students and counselors understand what the transfer requirements are and will make it easier for staff to communicate the requirements.[29]

FIGURE 3



Persons 25-29 Years Old Who Have Completed Four or More Years of College
Ratio as a Percentage of non-Latino White Men
(1 = Equality with non-Latino White Men)

Whether they are studying in two- or four-year institutions, improving Latinos' adjustment to college will increase their persistence to graduation. Well-established mentoring relationships with faculty and/or upper-level college students can increase the likelihood that students will graduate. Through these relationships, which validate Latino students' presence on campus, students learn how to use the higher education system to their own benefit. In addition, increasing financial aid,

such as Pell Grants and scholarships, will improve Latino students' college adjustment. As mentioned, we saw that Latinos are often distracted by financial problems. Increasing financial aid will ease Latinos' financial burdens and allow them more time to concentrate on their studies.[30]

In order to influence the future of the United States, Latinos must enroll and graduate at all levels of the education ladder. There is no doubt that efforts must be made to increase Latinos' high school graduation rate and to increase the number who graduate with the appropriate requirements to pursue a college education. Administrators at higher education institutions, however, cannot wait for this to happen. They must take the appropriate steps now and commit themselves to improving Latino student college success.

This publication was made possible by funding from General Motors, the W. F. Kellogg Foundation, and the National Hispanic Scholarship Fund, through their support of IUPLR's Education Initiative. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any IUPLR funders.

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