



# LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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## THE GROWING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY GAP FOR CALIFORNIA'S LATINA/O STUDENTS

Lindsay Pérez Huber, Verónica N. Vélez, and Daniel G. Solórzano

Several recent reports have noted an increase in educational attainment for Latina/o students (Fry and Taylor 2013; Layton 2013). In California, approximately 60 percent of Latina/o students graduated from high school in 2012 (Pérez Huber et al. 2014).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, just over half of Latina/o high school students were graduating nationally in 2000 (see Pérez Huber et al. 2006), suggesting that educational attainment for Latina/os has been improving.<sup>2</sup>

The outlook changes, however, when educational attainment data are considered in terms of population growth. Snapshots that do not account for shifting demographics cannot present an accurate portrayal of educational attainment. When the data for California graduates are contextualized, an equity gap appears, indicating that in reality, the picture for Latina/o students is alarming.

### THE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY GAP

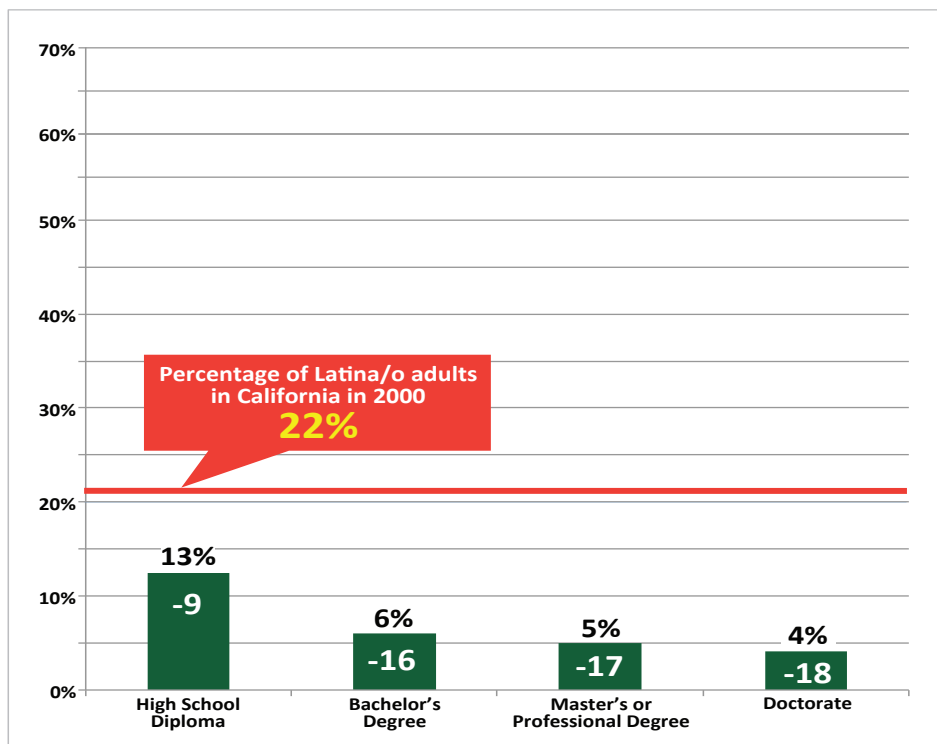
To more accurately determine educational attainment, we use an “equity line” to represent the proportion of Latina/os in the adult population (defined here as twenty-five years of age and older) in California. In 2000 Latina/os made up 22 percent of the population, as shown by the equity line in figure 1.<sup>3</sup> Educational attainment is represented by the columns, which show

Latinas/os as a percentage of all adults in California who obtained a particular diploma or degree. Among all California adults who earned a high school diploma, Latina/os made up only 13 percent. If educational attainment had been equitable, that figure would be 22 percent, the same as the percentage of Latina/o adults in California. By the same token, approximately 22 percent would have received a degree in each of the other categories: bachelor's degree, master's or professional degree, and doctorate. We call this difference between the equity line and the level of educational attainment the educational equity gap.

For example, the educational equity gap for Latina/os who earned a high school diploma in California in 2000 is negative by 9 points. The negative gap for high school graduation not only persists but grows wider in higher education. Latina/os represented only 6 percent of all adults earning bachelor's degrees, a negative gap of 16 points. At the master's and professional level, Latina/os represented only 5 percent of all degrees earned, yielding a negative gap of 17 points. Finally, Latina/os represented only 4 percent of doctoral degrees in the state, creating a negative gap of 18 points.

In figure 2 we apply the equity gap construct to data for 2012, when the Latina/o population in California had grown to 30 percent of the total population. Among all high school graduates, the proportion of Latina/os who earned a high school diploma had increased to 21 percent. Yet, because the population of Latina/os had also significantly increased, the equity gap is the same: negative by 9 points, indicating that no real gain was made. The equity gap worsens as degrees become more advanced. Latina/os represented only 10 percent of those who earned bachelor's degrees, yielding a negative gap of 20 points, substantially wider than the gap of 16 points in 2000.

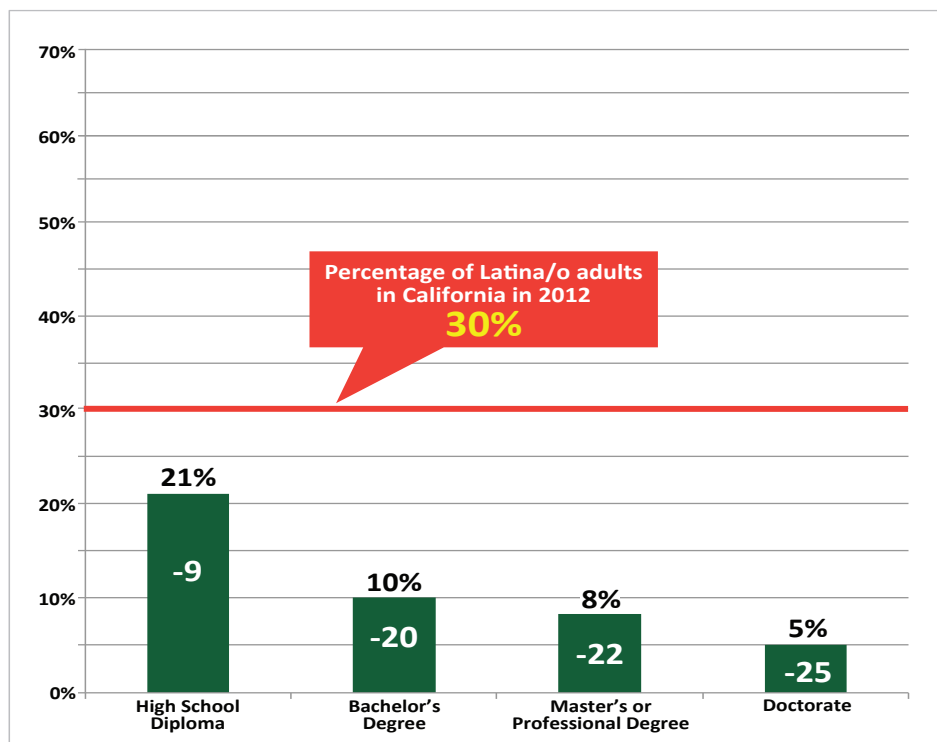
Figure 1. Latina/o Degree Attainment in California, 2000



Note: Each column shows Latina/os as a percentage of all adult (aged twenty-five and above) degree holders in California in that category.

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2000 compiled by the US Census Bureau.

Figure 2. Latina/o Degree Attainment in California, 2012



Note: Each column shows Latina/os as a percentage of all adult (aged twenty-five and above) degree holders in California in that category.

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2012 compiled by the US Census Bureau.

The shortfall for advanced degrees was even greater: the negative gap for master's or professional degrees was 22 points, and the negative gap for doctorates was a remarkable 25 points. A comparison of figures 1 and 2 reveals that between 2000 and 2012 Latina/os became further underrepresented among Californians holding advanced degrees.

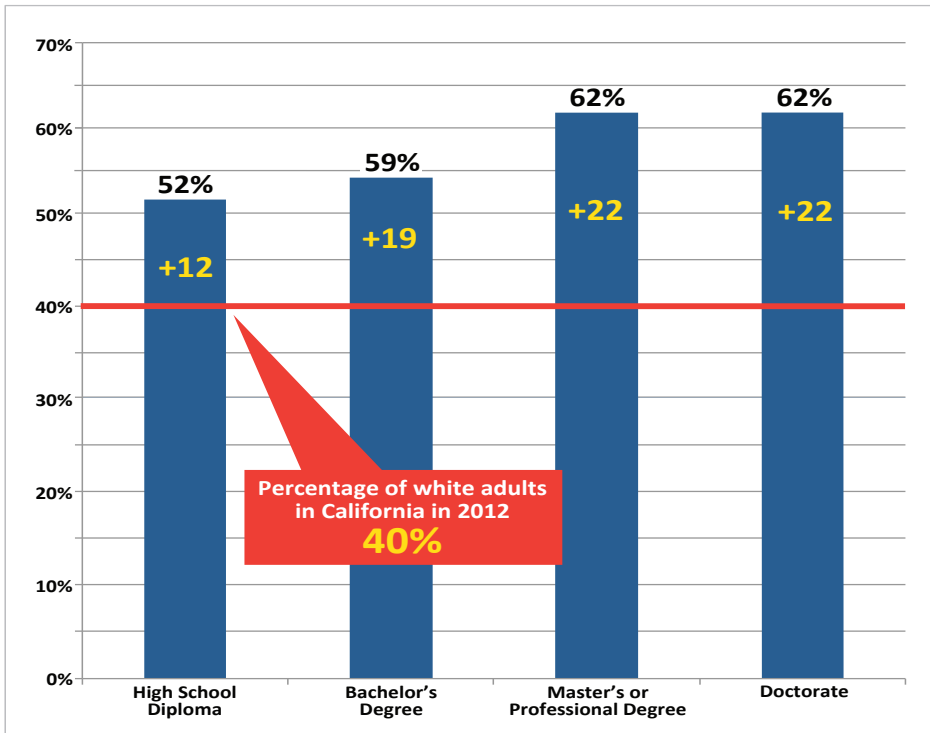
COMPARING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EQUITY GAPS

As figures 1 and 2 show, a consideration of population growth is critical to understanding trends in educational attainment. Just as important is to compare outcomes for Latina/os with those of other racial/ethnic groups. We found that for whites in California in 2012, the equity gap was positive.

Forty percent of the state's adult population was white, and this is where the equity line is drawn in figure 3. Yet whites received 52 percent of all high school diplomas in 2012, producing a positive equity gap of 12 points. The gap is positive in the other three degree categories as well: bachelor's degrees, positive by 19 points; master's and professional degrees, positive by 22 points; and doctorates, positive by 22 points. Moreover, the white population in California has decreased since 2000, when it was 53 percent, resulting in the overrepresentation of whites in all categories of degree attainment and sharpening the dramatic differences in educational attainment between Latina/os and whites.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our comparison of the educational equity gap for whites and for Latina/os in California signals vast disparities in educational access, resources, and opportunities between these two groups. These findings demand the attention of policymakers, educators, and researchers, who will have to devise effective strategies for narrowing the Latina/o equity gap. An essential first step is a comprehensive examination of the quality of education for Latina/o students at all segments

**Figure 3. White Degree Attainment in California, 2012**

Note: Each column shows white as a percentage of all adult (aged twenty-five and above) degree holders in California in that category.

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) data for 2012 compiled by the US Census Bureau.

of the educational pipeline, from K-12 through higher education. Government and philanthropic agencies must increase support for programs and educational interventions that supplement and enhance learning. Finally, we must make a collective, statewide commitment to eliminating the growing equity gap that threatens California's Latina/o population. If we choose not to, a dark future lies ahead for us all. Our hope is that we have the courage to make this commitment.

#### NOTES

- 1 Pérez Huber et al. (2014) reported that out of every 100 Latina/o elementary school students, 59 Latinas and 57 Latinos graduated from high school in 2012.
- 2 Pérez Huber et al. (2006) reported that out of every 100 Latina/o elementary school students in the United States, 54 Latinas and 51 Latinos graduated from high school in 2000.
- 3 Limiting our study to those twenty-five years of age and older is consistent with US Census Bureau standards and reporting on this topic. For the latest releases on educational attainment see [www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/index.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/index.html). The information provided in figures 1, 2, and 3 was drawn from statistics compiled by the US Census Bureau for its American Community Survey

(ACS). The ACS asks respondents to indicate their origin: Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; or another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Respondents who select the latter are asked to write in their origin. For this report, the category "Latina/os" includes individuals who identified as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Panamanian, Salvadoran, or other Central American. It is important to note that in the ACS and other census databases, persons who report themselves as Latina/o can be of any race.

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Although recent studies suggest that educational attainment for Latina/os has been improving, the authors show that when demographic change is taken into consideration, it is clear that Latina/o students in California are not making gains but falling further behind.

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