



PERSPECTIVAS

Issues in Higher Education Policy and Practice

Spring 2016

A Policy Brief Series sponsored by the AAHHE, ETS & UTSA

Issue No. 5

Mexican Americans' Educational Barriers and Progress: Is the Magic Key Within Reach?

Executive Summary

This policy brief is based on the edited book *The Magic Key: The Educational Journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to College and Beyond* (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015a), which focuses on the experiences of Mexican Americans in education. As the largest of the Latino subgroups with the longest history in America, and the lowest levels of educational attainment, this community warrants particular attention. Drawing from an interdisciplinary corpus of work, the authors move beyond the rhetoric of

progress and engage intersectional analytic frameworks. We explore how historical events and consequent practices and policies depleted the accumulation of human capital and contributed to disinvestments in Mexican American communities. This scholarship decenters cultural problem-oriented and ethnic-focused deficit arguments and provides substantial evidence of structural, institutional and normative racial processes of inequality. New findings are introduced that create more dynamic views of — and new thinking about — Mexican American educational trajectories. We

also proffer strategies of resistance that Mexican Americans employ to overcome pernicious stereotypes and prejudicial barriers to educational achievement. Reaffirming how little has changed, we engage in a process of recovering dynamic history to inform Mexican American scholarship and future policy and practice.

AUTHORS

Ruth Enid Zambrana, Ph.D.

University of Maryland, College Park

Sylvia Hurtado, Ph.D.

University of California, Los Angeles

NATIONAL EDITORIAL BOARD

Estela Mara Bensimon, Ed.D.

Professor and Co-Director, Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California

Yvette Donado

Senior Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, Educational Testing Service

Richard P. Durán, Ph.D.

Professor, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara

Luis Ricardo Fraga, Ph.D.

Arthur Foundation Endowed Professor of Transformative Latino Studies, Professor of Political Science, University of Notre Dame

Eugene E. García, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, School of Transborder Studies and Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Joel Gómez, Ed.D.

Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Director, Institute for Education Studies, The George Washington University

Kris D. Gutiérrez, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor, School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder

Sylvia Hurtado, Ph.D.

Professor, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Pedro A. Noguera, Ph.D.

Distinguished Professor and Director, Center for the Study of School Transformation, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Loui Olivas, Ed.D.

President, American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Professor Emeritus, Entrepreneurial Studies, W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University

Noé Ortega

Assistant Director and Senior Research Associate, National Center for Institutional Diversity, University of Michigan

Clara E. Rodríguez, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Fordham University

Victor B. Sáenz, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Educational Administration, Executive Director, Project MALES and Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color, The University of Texas at Austin

Gerardo E. de los Santos, Ph.D.

President and CEO, League for Innovation in the Community College

José A. Vicente, Ph.D.

President, Wolfson Campus, Miami Dade College

EDITORS

Editor: Laura I. Rendón, Ph.D.

Professor and Co-Director, Center for Research and Policy in Education, The University of Texas at San Antonio

Associate Editor: Vijay Kanagala, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator, Department of Leadership and Developmental Sciences, The University of Vermont

Managing Editor: Demeturie Toso-Lafaele Gogue,

Graduate Research Assistant, Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration, The University of Vermont

Introduction

A first-generation, college-bound Mexican American female was interviewed and was asked about her inspiration to persist in school and meet challenges. She told the following story:

“My father took me to the fields where he worked and told me that I would not have to work in the fields if I stayed in school and studied hard. He said, ‘You will have the *Magic Key*, which is your education’ ... My father’s story made me want to study more.”

The story of the Magic Key reveals a culture of resilience and resistance and provides insights into how Mexican Americans¹ manage to overcome barriers to success (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015b). Not foretold in this interaction are the continuing challenges that students encounter in their journeys that require critical strategies of resistance on their part to contend with obstacles associated with incremental progress and common practices across changing sociohistorical contexts. Mexican Americans are the largest (64.6%) Hispanic subgroup nationally, but the most starkly underrepresented (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). They are a much neglected population group in terms of research and policy, with lower rates of retention in P–12 and in college than other populations. These realities pose critical challenges for educational administrators and personnel and, consequently, for the progress of their communities (Motel

& Patten, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

In the edited book *The Magic Key: The Educational Journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to College and Beyond* (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015a), we highlight how Mexican American families and institutional agents in schools and colleges motivate students to obtain an education as the pathway beyond their current economic circumstances. From this book we offer a set of lessons learned, which are expressed in the form of “locks” (barriers) and “keys” (solutions) that summarize chapter findings. Book chapters are written through the collaborative efforts of senior and early career scholars who focus their attention on Mexican American education. This scholarship brings to light and resists suppression of vital knowledge that helps provide a realistic assessment of progress and affirms and supports the voices of Mexican American students in the challenges encountered along their educational journey.

Purpose

This brief seeks to improve the understanding of structural inequality in educational pathways for Mexican Americans; challenge the deficit model approach as an explanatory research paradigm; and call for ways to institutionalize effective educational policies and practices. Most importantly, we encourage more research using an intersectional, historical and life-course lens on Mexican Americans, who not only compose the largest Latino ethnic group, but also face the most

educational challenges in the United States.

Locks & Keys: The Educational Journey



Mexican American educational progress is difficult to assess

because research and interpretations of their lived experiences are often presented as ahistorical and neglect the continuing forces of structural inequality.

Understanding the unique patterns and processes of educational trajectories demands an examination of historical features and the ways that empirical data are collected and used to explain patterns of educational underperformance. Mexican Americans’ educational progress tells a harrowing story of the historical practices of exclusion and denial of basic rights to education under the Spanish and American rule until the mid-20th century (MacDonald & Rivera, 2015). A history of exclusion yields a legacy of segregation, stereotypic representations of inferior intelligence, and resistance to learning that continue to shape how Mexican American students are viewed and treated in many public school systems.

While investigators offer a variety of different paradigms and theoretical explanations that discuss why enrollment and retention in higher education remain low for Mexican American men and women, the historical and social contexts reveal the larger structural forces associated

¹ Mexican American/Chicano/Chicana is used throughout this brief interchangeably. Chicano is a term that many speculate has multiple origins, but many agree the term was adopted by Mexican American activists that emerged with a political movement (*el movimiento*, in the 1960s–1970s) for social justice and self-determination. It is also important to note that identity is fluid and varies by geographic region. In the five states that were originally northern Mexico (California, Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona), Mexican-origin people have extensive generational roots and perceive their identity as *Hispanos*, Americans of Mexican heritage or descent, *Mexicanos*, Americans, *Tejanos*, etc. The term *Hispanic* is used typically when referencing U.S. government data, since that is the category used in U.S. Census and National Center for Education Statistics data collection and reports.

with these realities. All researchers conduct their studies within contexts that are bound by historical time. In the study of the Mexican American educational trajectory, the role of historicity and its force in shaping structural educational inequality cannot be excluded.

History informs and, more importantly, shapes group experiences and patterns, as well as helps us assess progress or stagnation. Historically, children were forced to attend segregated schools, were prohibited from speaking Spanish and were subjected to inferior instruction (Carter & Segura, 1979; Moreno, 1999; San Miguel, 2013). Attitudes of racism and classism prevailed and marginalized these students. As Carter and Segura (1979) observe: “Educators shared the community’s view of them as outsiders who were never expected to participate fully in American life” (p. 15). The neglect of Mexican Americans over time by the political and educational system is the result of persistent structural inequalities associated with disproportionate academic underperformance.



An examination of structural and historical forces using an intersectional lens is fundamental to analyzing the experiences of Mexican Americans.

The dearth of educational personnel, from teachers to counselors to higher education staff and faculty, and the low rate of four-year college completion among Mexican Americans are two striking issues that highlight the multiple factors associated with the accumulation of educational advantage or disadvantage. To advance our understanding of these two issues, a more interdisciplinary, intersectional

perspective is warranted to formulate a broader theorizing discourse of educational processes and outcomes among Mexican Americans. An intersectional lens examines patterns of educational attainment, taking into account power relations that shape institutions in which historically underrepresented women and men have participated, as well as patterns of inequality, which include both hegemonic and disciplinary power (Covarrubias, 2011; Ramírez, 2013; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015c). This approach allows for an expanded understanding of the complex role that historical conditions play in family development, socioeconomic status and racial formation. Structural and other institutional factors are equally associated with the successful completion of various educational milestones in the P–16 pathways and beyond to the long-term career trajectory.



The cultural-deficit model and deficit-thinking still dominate views and interpretations of educational research on Mexican American students at all levels.

While the history of racial/ethnic exclusion remains relatively unknown and structural inequality is rarely taught in schools, pervasive social constructions of inferiority have marked the life experiences of Mexican origin peoples in the United States. This often takes the form of, and is known as, a *culturally deterministic approach*, wherein ethnic values regarding education are assumed to be the cause of low attainment and performance. The approach in research and practice is deployed to focus on individual and ethnic group deficits without regard to structural inequality or institutional factors that shape

Mexican American economic, social and political outcomes. Differences, however, are not necessarily deficits, and low attainment and performance are due to a host of economic and social factors that shape opportunity structures (e.g., quality health services, employment, access to quality educational institutions) and pathways for these students. Moreover, cultural deficit assumptions not only ignore wealth and color privilege associated with (in)equality, but cannot account for social agency, resilience and success among Mexican Americans who overcome the barriers associated with being low-income and first-generation to achieve success in schools and colleges. What explains the success of the first-generation of college-educated Chicanas, whom we call *pioneras* (Zambrana, De Jesús & Dávila, 2015)? How can we explain the large numbers of low-income and first-generation college students who are beating the odds and enrolling in four-year institutions today?



Using an asset-based approach is central to understanding Mexican American students’ success in spite of obstacles associated with low-income and first-generation status.

First, Mexican American parents socialize children to navigate the educational process by offering emotional support and teaching their children defensive strategies for navigating between cultures. Second, the long history of resistance and social agency have resulted in some victories for Mexican American education and more than likely have served as examples of ethnic empowerment that have translated into the success of Mexican American children.

Several researchers (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2015; Yosso, 2005, 2006; Zambrana & Burciaga, 2015) now use the concept of community cultural wealth that includes 1) resistant capital, when Mexican Americans and other Latinos challenge inequality; 2) linguistic capital, where communication in another language is beneficial; 3) navigational capital, where Mexican Americans and other Latinas/os learn to navigate social institutions and barriers; 4) social capital, where resources are accessed through social networks; 5) familial capital, which signifies the strength of cultural knowledge and family histories; and 6) aspirational capital, where aspirations and hope are motivating factors despite challenges. Many academic support programs for student access and success (e.g., PUENTE, GEAR UP, Parent Institute for Quality Education) now also take an asset-based approach involving parents and families in early educational activities, creating communications in Spanish and English, and integrating cultural activities. Further, inclusive activities in the classroom integrate and validate the backgrounds and perspectives of Mexican American students as contributions to the learning process.



The erroneous belief that families are major impediments to Mexican

American youth's educational success has blinded institutional educational agents to the role that family socioeconomic status (SES), including parental education and social capital (resources and benefits received from social class status networks), plays in determining where parents live. The quality of schools in low-SES neighborhoods, unevenly distributed resources, implicit bias and

differential, racist treatment of students are significant barriers to educational performance.

Although low-income, first-generation college-bound Mexican American youth still face many financial and social obstacles such as discrimination and racism, family transmitted strengths enable them to overcome and succeed through various educational pathways. While deficit-based studies on Mexican American educational attainment erroneously assert that families are not supportive (Valencia & Black, 2002), research shows that structural inequality and limited material resources are critical factors in the decreased access to the opportunities that influence educational careers and shape the life course for Mexican American youth (Contreras, 2011; Telles & Ortiz, 2008).

A growing body of knowledge depicts the myriad roles families play in the successful academic performance of Mexican American girls (Burciaga, 2007; Ceja, 2004; Flores Carmona, 2010; Villenas, 2006; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Less is known, however, about the *pioneras* — what types of family strengths and social capital did the families of the first Mexican American women cohort transmit to their daughters to help them successfully navigate the educational pipeline, from K–12 through college and beyond (Gándara, 1995, 1997)?

Research examining structural inequality using asset-based approaches challenges overly simplistic inquiry that often examines delinquent behaviors or pregnancy as a catalyst for why Mexican American girls have left school. Such deficit-based research seems to assume that one learns best

about students' lives by examining failure (see Zambrana, 2011). The major shortcoming of this approach is its narrow focus on the individual or cultural aspects of the phenomena without an understanding of the relationship of ethnic groups, specifically Mexican Americans, to the historical record and existing power relations that shape racial hierarchy and institutional structures.

Critical race theory (CRT) posits racism's intersections with other forms of marginality. It informs the study of educational inequalities with an asset-based lens of inquiry, as opposed to conventional deficit models of inquiry (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). The Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) framework informed by CRT is especially useful as it centers gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status — among other intersections of marginality — with respect to educational attainment. Community cultural wealth highlights values and capacities nurtured by Mexican American communities that enable persistence and social mobility in the face of significant challenges. These resources are often overlooked in widely used analyses of cultural capital and social mobility, which tend to frame historically underrepresented minorities as merely deficient with respect to a constructed norm (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).



The discourse on the role of low-income Mexican American families in the educational performance of their offspring must be informed by both the economic context of family resources and access to social capital.

Mexican American families have the highest poverty rate of any ethnic

group, yet they have motivated their children to obtain an education (the Magic Key) that has opened a pathway of social mobility beyond their current economic circumstances. However, a greater understanding of the socioeconomic challenges confronted and the simultaneous familial cultivation of community cultural wealth seeks to interrupt the more conventional deficit interpretations of Mexican American families as unable to help their children pursue higher education.

Based on family-focused narratives of a large cohort of Mexican American women who successfully navigated the educational pathways through college and beyond (Zambrana & Burciaga, 2015), findings show that family factors, in tandem with other school factors, are associated with high educational performance. These data contribute to extending our theorizing lens on family socialization processes of Mexican American women who successfully completed higher education, an area of inquiry decidedly absent from conventional scholarly discourses. A critical review of past social science scholarship contributes to challenging the master narrative of Mexican Americans as not valuing education (Zambrana, 2011). In turn, these data on Mexican American women and their educational trajectory challenge the ideal and mythical role of the poor family by contextualizing family processes and drawing on intersectional theorizing constructs of history, power and racialized ethnicity.



High schools have become subtractive in nature rather than pedagogical, inclusive and uplifting institutions. School

personnel all too often dampen Mexican Americans' educational aspirations.

There is much to learn about how educators and school leaders work with Mexican American families who — because of long work hours, unwelcoming climate by institutional school agents and unfamiliarity with or fear of the school system — may be unable to fulfill traditional expectations for parental involvement. Despite these obstacles, families display clear investment in their children's *educación*. Because low expectations for Mexican American students are so prevalent (Valencia & Black, 2002), much work remains in areas of teacher education, principal certification and professional development in schools.

Valenzuela (1999) describes how traditional comprehensive high schools are organized formally and informally to divest Latina/o students of “important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (p. 3). Based on an ethnography of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students in a Houston high school, Valenzuela observes that “rather than building on students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and heritage to create biculturally and bilingually competent youth, schools subtract these identifications from them to their social and academic detriment” (p. 25).



Bridging institutional agents can provide instrumental support that allows for the transmission of social/cultural capital to students and its activation in their lives, developing among them a social network orientation and increased chances of attaining academic success.

The documentary *Precious Knowledge* (McGinnis & Palos, 2011) interwove the stories of students in the Mexican American Studies Program at Tucson High School. While 48% of Mexican American students at Tucson High School dropped out, their Mexican American Studies Program became a national model of educational success, with 100% of enrolled students graduating from high school and 85% going on to attend college. The documentary highlighted an entire year in the classroom, documenting the transformative impact on students who become engaged, informed and active in their communities.

Students highlighted in the documentary and Mexican American respondents indicated they all had compelling aspirations and approaches of resistance. Five major themes emerged: 1) some had a hunger to learn; 2) some wanted to prove themselves; 3) some had a desire to achieve upward mobility; 4) others did not want to experience their parents' challenges; and 5) many wanted to follow in the footsteps of siblings or received special encouragement from a sibling.

The documentary clearly identified the importance of institutional agents. Teachers and other school agents often served as bridging institutional agents (De Jesús, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2010), transmitting social/cultural capital to students and supporting them in developing a bicultural and social network orientation. This finding is instructive for institutional agents or school personnel seeking avenues to promote success and institutional integration for Mexican American students. These asset-building interactions can be described

as *educational pivotal moments* (Espinoza, 2011) that can promote college and professional success. In the chapter by Zambrana, De Jesús, and Dávila (2015), the data showed that while many respondents confronted barriers in their schools, these high-achieving Chicanas resisted assumptions that they did “not care,” and focused on academic achievement and decision making about college as a way to “prove them wrong” and overcome pernicious stereotypes. Educators must recognize the persistent stereotypes that Chicanas face in their educational pursuits and incorporate efforts in their work to dismantle such pervasive attitudes in schools.

The data on *pioneras* confirm what the documentary seeks to emphasize: that Chicana/o and other ethnic-identity academic enrichment programs and Mexican American school agents provide considerable support to Mexican American students. These ethnic-focused programs are linked to the success of Mexican American students and to broader goals of community and ethnic group progress. Schools and their institutional agents must respect the identity and heritage of the student body, increase the number of ethnic-focused programs and integrate them into the curriculum to augment successful Mexican American educational performance. To bridge intergenerational differences regarding college and career opportunities, educators must engage in outreach to parents (and siblings) to educate entire families.



Mexican Americans from marginalized social identities (e.g., low-income, LGBTQ students) continue to report unwelcoming college environments.

Mexican American students continue to be the target of microaggressions on predominantly White campuses, as well as on campuses that are more diverse. However, little is done to train staff and faculty or educate students about Mexican American culture and backgrounds. Microaggressions are defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” on the part of the offending individual (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). Stereotyping, discrimination, bias and even harassment happen more frequently when Latinas/os are underrepresented in college, but can also occur in more diverse institutions. Perceptions of the campus climate and actual experiences of hostile interactions can “affect how students develop a sense of their racial/ethnic self” and their sense of belonging in college (Cabrera & Hurtado, 2015, p. 151). Ruiz Alvarado & Hurtado (2015) found that institutional climate is perceived and experienced differently based on intersections of multiple social identities such as gender, sexual orientation, income and generational status. The researchers measured academic validation (Rendón, 1994) as valuing students’ contributions in class, receiving feedback from instructors that helped them judge their progress, attending to students’ level of understanding of course material, and encouraging questions and participation in class. In terms of Mexican American experiences, classroom contexts matter. Mexican American students are more likely to experience academic validation in community colleges than they are in universities, and least likely to receive validation in the most

selective institutions. Thus, Mexican American representation in specific institutional contexts plays an important role in whether students sense that they are academically validated in classrooms, feel empowered as learners, sense they belong on campus, or experience discrimination and bias.



Improving Mexican American representation in college is a first step in reducing racial isolation and alleviating issues of unwelcoming campus climates.

Mexican American students may seek “safe spaces” in cultural centers, Latina/o Greek organizations, and ethnic campus organizations to promote awareness, enhance healthy identity development and get respite from discrimination and bias (Cabrera & Hurtado, 2015). Faculty and staff serve as institutional agents to help students navigate the institution (Stanton-Salazar, 2010) and confront challenges associated with intersectional identities.

Moreover, research findings indicate that academic validation curbs feelings of a hostile climate by diminishing discrimination and bias and increasing students’ sense of belonging (Ruiz Alvarado & Hurtado, 2015; Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015). This strongly suggests that faculty and staff development should focus on the use of inclusive practices to create safe spaces for personal growth and development. It also suggests the need to train staff and instructors to facilitate engagement across multiple social identities to improve classroom and campus climates, minimize inadvertent microaggressions, and diminish discrimination and bias directed at Mexican Americans.



College affordability is a key concern for Mexican Americans.

When data are disaggregated, Mexican Americans are more likely to live in poverty (28%) and are younger than other racial and ethnic groups, with 40% under the age of 19 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This means that many more Mexican Americans are within the traditional college age range, but often make choices based on affordability. Financial issues play a role in not only deciding which college to attend, but also in decisions about whether to remain in college. Differences between Mexican American men and women’s financial concerns and the location of the first four-year college they have chosen to attend reveal interesting trends over time. Hurtado’s (2015) historical trend analyses demonstrate that Mexican American women, relative to men, have historically been less confident about their ability to finance college (see Table 1). Over the decades, the proportion of students who expect to get a job to help pay for college expenses has increased, with 63% of women and more than half of men (51%) expecting to do so in recent cohorts of Mexican American first-year students entering four-year institutions. It is no wonder, as college expenses have risen and students have extended their time to degree completion, that more Mexican American men and women are opting to choose a four-year college that is close to home and work. Hence, a growing number of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (reaching 25% Latina/o enrollments or higher) are located nearest to Mexican American population centers.

Table 1. Financial Concerns Among Mexican American Freshmen and Location of First 4-Year College Attended

	Chicano			Chicana		
	1972	1992	2012	1972	1992	2012
<i>Concern About Financing College</i>						
None (I am confident that I’ll have sufficient funds)	26.1	20.6	19.5	10.5	12.3	11.3
Some (but I probably will have enough funds)	47.2	56.8	62.9	59.7	53.7	62.4
Major (not sure I will have enough funds to complete college)	26.6	22.6	17.6	29.7	34.0	26.3
<i>Work Expectations During College*</i>						
I expect to get a job to help pay for college expenses	36.9	39.1	51.3	41.5	46.6	63.2
<i>Proximity of the College to Home</i>						
Less than 50 miles	38.6	45.6	58.3	48.5	45.5	58.1
More than 50 miles from home	61.4	54.4	41.7	51.6	54.5	41.8

Source: Data archives, Higher Education Research Institute, The Freshman Survey, CIRP.
*Percentage reporting there is a “very good chance.”



Increasing students’ financial literacy and providing tools to calculate real costs are important to helping Mexican Americans choose colleges.

It is important to advise students to apply in a timely fashion for student aid, seek scholarships and evaluate the net cost of college at a variety of institutions. Some of this information is already on college websites and College Results Online (sponsored by the Education Trust). However, to keep Mexican Americans in college, institutions of higher education must find ways to reduce the number of hours students are working. Ensuring adequate financial aid and good pay for work-study opportunities that will contribute to academic achievement and long-term career goals also are important. For example, many interventions in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) majors provide opportunities for students to “earn

and learn” in undergraduate research that will be helpful in advancing their careers. Most of the growth in new jobs will be in STEM fields, and ensuring that Mexican American students have both the academic preparation and opportunities to be successful in college is central to their progress in those fields.

At a policy level, reduction of funding for institutions causes increases in tuition costs to students, creating a see-saw effect that must be balanced or offset by increasing aid to students. College affordability is an important component of a national policy agenda that significantly affects Mexican American students and families.



The educational future of Mexican American male students is in a state of peril.

Data show that first-time, full-time Mexican American male students outnumbered females in entrance

to four-year institutions in the early 1970s. But by the mid-1980s, women's representation surpassed men — a trend that has continued to accelerate since the 1990s (Hurtado, 2015). The gender gap has taken on a new narrative and is more complex. Many of the origins of gender disparities begin early, as Latino males are more likely to encounter disciplinary problems, be suspended from class, drop out of school and exhibit suicidal and depressive tendencies (Ponjuán & Sáenz, 2015). Historically, Mexican Americans have had among the highest participation rates in the labor force, but they tend to work in low-wage occupations with little or no health insurance and in more hazardous occupations (Maldonado & Farmer, 2006). Ponjuán & Sáenz (2015) confirm that, compared to other Latino males, Mexican American males are least likely to have earned a bachelor's degree, have the highest percentage earning less than \$34,999 a year (22.1%), are least likely to hold management positions and are more likely to be in blue-collar jobs. These scholars contend that the larger crisis is that few meaningful discussions are taking place to resolve these issues. Young Mexican American males constitute the fastest-growing employment pool, yet their talent is underutilized.



Applying research to policy and program development is necessary to improve Mexican American male educational success and opportunity. Research helps highlight the specific needs of Mexican American males at different life stages, focusing on the Pre-K–college continuum as sites for intervention.

Project MALES encompasses an ongoing research agenda focused on understanding the experiences of Latino males in the education pipeline. The project includes a mentoring program that aims to cultivate an engaged support network for males of color at UT-Austin and throughout the Central Texas community. Also included is a statewide P–16 Consortium focused on the success of male students of color. Several interventions have emerged to address the needs of Mexican American males that involve families and/or peers and often take a community-based approach, such as Fathers Active in Communities and Education, *Encuentros* Leadership and XY-Zone. Important policies recommended by researchers include improving access to a college-ready curriculum, having greater transparency regarding financing college, creating tools for financial aid literacy and increasing Mexican American male role models in schools by recruiting Mexican American male teachers through loan forgiveness programs.



Educational policies in the United States have not promoted equity and access to resources to sufficiently move the needle on the educational progress of Mexican Americans.

Contreras (2015) identifies key anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant policies affecting student progress in education from 1994–2013. These include state policies that bar undocumented students from attending public institutions or opportunities to receive aid, immigration policies, linguistic policy restrictions, the banning of ethnic studies in schools (Arizona) and anti-affirmative action policies.

Just as more Mexican Americans are enrolling in institutions of higher education, onslaughts of policies have intensified to close the door to the highest-resourced institutions. Further, achievement data show that Chicano/Latino students are six times less likely than White students to be enrolled in an Advanced Placement® (AP®) mathematics or science course due to the tremendous variation in the availability of these courses in high schools or tracking systems that limit their enrollment. Accountability policies in 28 states with tests for high school graduation have not minimized achievement gaps or raised graduation rates primarily because they have not altered “sources of inequity” (e.g., teacher quality, resource allocation, school quality) (Contreras, 2015, p. 236). In contrast, federal and state intervention programs continue to play a critical role in promoting college readiness and in providing access to academic resources for Mexican American students. Although effective programs show successful outcomes, reductions in public funding for these interventions (e.g., TRIO, GEAR UP, Talent Search, Upward Bound) portend devastating consequences for Mexican American students.



Addressing unequal resources in schools and eliminating high-stakes testing when the onus is placed on the student instead of the institution for low achievement constitute the most important public policy agenda for Mexican American students.

Because change in schools has not happened fast enough to adequately serve Mexican American students, intervention programs must continue to garner federal and state support or risk the economic and societal

costs of large numbers of Mexican American youth who fail to graduate from high school and college. Other recommendations include instituting cost controls for public four-year colleges and expanding financial aid options to open doors for more Mexican American students to address the college affordability issue that relegates students to institutions with the lowest resources. Contreras (2015) suggests restoring affirmative action policies for achieving greater equity and opportunity for underserved and underrepresented student populations. A policy agenda for Mexican American students is urgently needed because the nation's ability to sustain itself rests on the shoulders of the growing numbers of young Mexican American students. The next stages of this work should focus on the contours of such an agenda that will open locked doors and demonstrate real progress in closing inequities in education and the workplace.

Past and current proposed solutions include universal early childhood programs, after-school educational enrichment programs and high school counselors who are knowledgeable about, and interested in, helping students attend college. At the high school and college levels, many bridge programs have been defunded, which creates a large gap for those who are economically and educationally disadvantaged. Such programs include, for example, full-time summer programs that focus on educational and social skills to help prepare students for entrance into community colleges and four-year colleges.

Other common-sense proposed solutions include increases in

scholarships for less-affluent students who come from families whose parents have not graduated from high school, and strengthening Hispanic-Serving Institutions to prepare Mexican Americans for selective graduate programs that will build the Mexican American professional work force. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) (2013), across the nation more than 80% of the bachelor's degrees in education awarded during the 2009–2010 school year went to non-Latino White students. Only 4.2% were awarded to Latinos, and Mexican Americans constituted only 2% of all faculty in colleges and universities. Most importantly, institutional agents play a critical role in academic validation that can counter experiences of discrimination and neglect. Thus, important steps to move forward include training and developing more Mexican American teachers throughout the pipeline, including at the master's and doctoral levels; providing a more robust and informed teacher education curriculum on issues that low-income and migrant children confront; and engaging in a self-reflexivity process of discovery of implicit bias to address stereotypes and history of inequity for all teachers. Moreover, promoting and training high-performing Mexican American teachers and race/ethnic competent teachers into leadership positions can initiate new ways of addressing the achievement gap for low-income Mexican American children. Transformative practice involves empowering students to learn and being aware of one's own role as teacher, counselor or scholar in the reproduction of inequality.

Conclusion

The educational agenda for Mexican Americans in the United States has remained relatively unchanged for decades, as evidenced by the ongoing White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics (WHIEEH) (1990–present). The agenda calls for more access to educational institutions and increased educational opportunities at all educational levels. Yet one wonders why so little has changed in the educational progress of Mexican Americans. New transformative research forces us to address the way critical race/ethnic findings by and/or about Mexican Americans are often neglected by policymakers and researchers who reject theories and explanations that underscore structural flaws in the social system. *To put it more bluntly, Mexican American scholarship has been ghettoized, and its segregation has stunted the growth of the field.* Thus, through this brief, we were committed to including the voices of scholars whose lived experiences and observations resonate with those whom they study and who deeply care about issues of educational inequity. Meanwhile, the debate rages on as to whether the failure of Mexican Americans in schools is due to poor role models in the home or racist stereotypes and attitudes in the school or campus climate.

In effect, whatever the explanation, Mexican American children and adults continue to be denied access to important educational pathways that lead to social mobility. The educational performance of a large number of Mexican-origin students in K–12, college and beyond will not improve without better policies and a greater investment of human and financial resources, delivered

by individuals who understand and can incorporate ethnically responsive and asset-based practices for student success. Obtaining and employing research and data can assist in this process by improving assessment of progress and identifying areas that pose continuing challenges to the attainment of the Magic Key by Mexican Americans.

References

- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). (2013). *The changing teacher preparation profession: A report from AACTE's professional education data system (PEDS)*. Washington, DC: AACTE.
- Bourdieu, P., and Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Burciaga, R. (2007). *Chicana Ph.D. students living Nepantla: Educación and aspirations beyond the doctorate* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT). Publication Number 3280937.
- Cabrera, N. L., & Hurtado, S. (2015). The ivory tower is still White: Chicana/o-Latina/o college students' views on racism, ethnic organizations, and campus racial segregation. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 145-168). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Carter, T. P., & Segura, R. D. (1979). *Mexican Americans in school: A decade of change*. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Ceja, M. (2004). Chicana college aspirations and the role of parents: Developing educational resiliency. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3(4), 338-362.
- Contreras, F. (2011). *Achieving equity for Latino students*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Contreras, F. (2015). The role of education policy in Mexican American college transition and completion. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 215-238). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Covarrubias, A. (2011). Quantitative intersectionality: A critical race analysis of the Chicana/o educational pipeline. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 10(2), 86-105.
- De Jesús, A. (2005). Theoretical perspectives on the underachievement of Latino students in US schools: Toward a framework for culturally additive schooling. In P. Pedraza & M. Rivera (Eds.), *Latino education: An agenda for community action research* (pp. 343-371). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Espinoza, R. (2011). *Pivotal moments: How educators can put all students on a path to college*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Flores Carmona, J. (2010). *Transgenerational educación: Latina mothers' everyday pedagogies of cultural citizenship in Salt Lake City, Utah* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT). Publication Number 3413558.
- Gándara, P. (1995). *Over the ivy walls: The educational mobility of low-income Chicanos*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gándara, P. (1997). *Review of research on the instruction of limited English proficient students: A report to the California legislature*. Davis, CA: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.
- Gonzalez-Barrera, A., & Lopez, M. H. (2013). *A demographic portrait of Mexican-origin Hispanics in the United States*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Research Center.
- Hurtado, S. (2015). Trend analyses from 1971 to 2012 on Mexican American/Chicano freshmen: Are we making progress? In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 53-75). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Hurtado, S., Ruiz Alvarado, A., & Guillermo-Wann, C. (2015). Creating inclusive environments: The mediating effect of faculty and staff validation on the relationship of discrimination/bias to students' sense of belonging. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, 1(1), 60-81.
- MacDonald, V. M., & Rivera, J. (2015). History's prism in education: A spectrum of legacies across centuries of Mexican American agency; experience and activism 1600s-2000s. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 25-53). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Maldonado, C., & Farmer, E. I. (2006). Examining Latinos' involvement in the workforce and postsecondary technical education in the United States. *Journal of Career and Technical Education*, 22(2), 1-13.
- McGinnis, E. I. (Producer), & Palos, A. L. (Director). (2011). *Precious knowledge* [Documentary]. United States: Dos Vatos Productions; PBS Independent Lens.
- Moreno, J. F. (Ed.). (1999). *The elusive quest for equality: 150 years of Chicano/Chicana education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Motel, S., & Patten, E. (2012). *The 10 largest Hispanic origin groups: Characteristics, rankings, top countries*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Research Center.
- Ponjuán, L., & Sáenz, V. B. (2015). Mexican American males' pathways to higher education: Awareness to achievement. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 193-215). Austin, TX: University of Texas.

- Ramírez, E. (2013). Examining Latino/as' graduate school choice process: An intersectionality perspective. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 12*(1), 23–36.
- Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education, 19*(1), 35–51.
- Rendón, L. I., Nora, A., & Kanagala, V. (2015). *Ventajas/assets y conocimientos*/knowledge: Leveraging Latin@ assets to foster student success. In J. P. Mendez, F. A. Bonner II, J. Méndez-Negrete, & R. T. Palmer (Eds.), *Hispanic-serving institutions in American higher education: Their origin, and present and future challenges* (pp. 92–118). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Ruiz Alvarado, A. & Hurtado, S. (2015). Campus climate, intersecting identities, and institutional support among Mexican American college students. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond* (pp. 168–191). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- San Miguel, G., Jr. (2013). *Chicana/o struggles for education: Activism in the community*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Solórzano, D. G., and Yosso, T. J. (2000). Toward a critical race theory of Chicana and Chicano education. In C. Tejada, C. Martinez, & Z. Leonardo (Eds.), *Charting terrains of Chicana(o)/Latina(o) education* (pp. 35–65). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.
- Solórzano, D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 60–73.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2010). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth and Society, 43*(3), 1–44.
- Telles, E. E., & Ortiz, V. (2008). *Generations of exclusion: Mexican Americans, assimilation and race*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Current population survey, annual social and economic supplement, 2011*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities. (Report No. NCES 2010-015). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015/index.asp>.
- Valencia, R., & Black, M. (2002). 'Mexican Americans don't value education!' — On the basis of the myth, mythmaking, and debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 1*(2), 81–103.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Villenas, S. A. (2006). Pedagogical moments in the borderland: Latina mothers teaching and learning. In D. Delgado Bernal, C. A. Elenes, F. E. Godínez, & S. Villenas (Eds.), *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 147–159). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Villenas, S. A., & Moreno, M. (2001). To *valerse por si misma* between race, capitalism, and patriarchy: Latina mother-daughter pedagogies in North Carolina. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*(5), 671–687.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69–91.
- Yosso, T. J. (2006). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Zambrana, R. E. (2011). *Latinos in American society: Families and communities in transition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Zambrana, R. E., & Burciaga, R. (2015). Parental education and gender expectations: Pushing the educational trajectory. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond* (pp. 100–122). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Zambrana, R. E., De Jesús, A., & Dávila, B. (2015). Examining the influence of K–12 school experiences on the higher education pathway. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond* (pp. 122–145). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Zambrana, R. E. & Hurtado, S. (2015a). *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Zambrana, R. E. & Hurtado, S. (2015b). Locked doors, closed opportunities: Who holds the magic key? In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond* (pp. 3–21). Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Zambrana, R. E., & Hurtado, S. (2015c). An intersectional lens: Theorizing an educational paradigm of success. In R. E. Zambrana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to college and beyond* (pp. 77–100). Austin, TX: University of Texas.

About *PERSPECTIVAS*

PERSPECTIVAS is produced in partnership with the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the Center for Research and Policy in Education, The University of Texas at San Antonio. Its purpose is to provide a venue for policy formulation, to highlight best practices, and to disseminate cutting-edge research to improve access, retention, and graduation of Latina/o students in higher education. The vision of *PERSPECTIVAS* is to be recognized by the P–20 education community as the premier publication addressing research and policy related to Latina/o student success and solutions to improve access, persistence, retention, and college completion.

ETS Strategy, Marketing & Growth Staff

Frank Gómez, Strategic Alliances Executive
 Elizabeth M. Hancock, Internal Communications Leader
 Eileen Kerrigan, Creative Writer & Editor
 George Barrett, Design Department Manager
 Sally Acquaviva, Designer
 Sherri Lutz, Traffic Manager

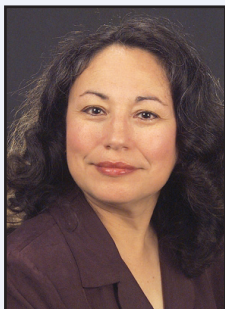
All questions regarding this policy brief may be directed to:

Editor, *PERSPECTIVAS*
 Center for Research and Policy in Education
 The University of Texas at San Antonio
 501 W. César E. Chávez Blvd.
 San Antonio, TX 78207
 Phone: 1-210-458-6503 / Fax: 1-210-458-5848

About The Authors



Ruth Enid Zambrana is a professor in the Department of Women's Studies, Director of the Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland, College Park, and adjunct Professor of Family Medicine at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Medicine. Dr. Zambrana's scholarship applies a critical intersectional lens to structural inequality as well as racial, Hispanic ethnicity, and gender inequity in population health and higher education trajectories. She has published extensively and serves on many social science and public health journal editorial boards. Her recent work includes an edited volume with Virginia Brennan and Shiriki Kumanyika titled *Obesity Interventions in Underserved U.S. Communities: Evidence and Directions* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); *Latinos in American Society: Families and Communities in Transition* (Cornell University Press, 2011); and an edited anthology with Bonnie T. Dill titled *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class and Gender in Theory, Policy and Practice* (Rutgers Press, 2009).



Sylvia Hurtado is a professor and former director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. Prior to coming to UCLA, she served as Director of the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan. She has published numerous articles and books related to Latina/o students, campus climates, college impact on student development, diversity in higher education and STEM education. She is past president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) and is an AERA Fellow. She received her Ph.D. from UCLA, M.Ed. from Harvard Graduate School of Education, and A.B. from Princeton University.

Sponsored by the AAHHE, ETS & UTSA

AAHHE



UTSA