

# Accelerated Learning and Financial Aid Associated with Positive Academic Outcomes for Hispanic First Generation College Students

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## Introduction

First generation college students (FGCS) of all racial/ethnic backgrounds graduate from college at lower rates than their non-first generation peers.<sup>1</sup> However, FGCS who are also Black or Hispanic graduate at even lower rates than FGCS who are White or Asian/Pacific Islander.<sup>2</sup> Out of all racial/ethnic groups, students of Hispanic background are proportionally the most prevalent among FGCS,<sup>3</sup> but are severely understudied given their prominence in the postsecondary system.

Prior research has demonstrated the positive association of accelerated learning<sup>4</sup> and financial aid with degree attainment rates.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, accelerated learning and

financial aid have been linked to improved academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, persistence, and degree attainment) for FGCS<sup>6</sup> and Hispanic students,<sup>7</sup> but to our knowledge, no studies have been conducted on Hispanic FGCS, in particular.

To address this gap, the current study focused on comparing several college outcomes between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS. These outcomes included first-year GPA, first-to-second year retention, and making progress toward a degree by earning at least 24 credit hours during their first year of college (labeled as being on-track).<sup>8</sup> Data were available for the incoming 2012 first-year class from one postsecondary institution

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that is located in the Southern US and predominantly serves Hispanic students ( $n = 2,499$ ). In addition to bivariate analyses, we developed regression models that examined the relationships between Hispanic FGCS status, prior accelerated learning participation, receipt of financial aid, and the aforementioned academic outcomes, after statistically controlling for other student characteristics (i.e., prior achievement [high school GPA, ACT Composite score], demographics [gender, family income, language fluency], and social-emotional skills [as measured by ACT Engage]).<sup>9</sup> According to the institution in this study, any student that received need-based aid was considered as receiving financial aid. Additionally, in line with the definition from the *Higher Education Act*, FGCS status was defined as any student whose parents had not completed a bachelor's degree.<sup>10</sup>

### Findings

From the bivariate analyses, we found that, as compared to Hispanic non-FGCS, Hispanic FGCS had lower average first-year GPAs (2.53 vs. 2.85),<sup>11</sup> were significantly less likely to persist from their first to second year at this institution (75% vs. 79%),<sup>12</sup> and were significantly less likely to have accumulated at least 24 credits during their first year (35% vs. 53%).<sup>13</sup>

From the multiple-predictor models, we found that Hispanic students who had participated in accelerated learning had significantly higher first-year GPAs on average than Hispanic students who did not participate in accelerated learning among FGCS (2.64 vs. 2.37),<sup>14</sup> but not among non-FGCS (2.75 vs. 2.70).<sup>15</sup>

These results are illustrated in Figure 1, where participation in accelerated learning programs was associated with smaller GPA achievement gaps between Hispanic

FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS, after holding all the other predictors in the model constant at their sample mean values.

Another finding of the study was that Hispanic students who received financial aid were significantly more likely than those who did not receive financial aid to persist from their first to second year at this institution among FGCS

(78% vs. 60%).<sup>16</sup> In comparison, this difference was not seen among non-FGCS (81% vs. 81%).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, gaps in first-to-second year retention rates between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS were reduced among students receiving financial aid, after statistically controlling for the other factors included in the models.

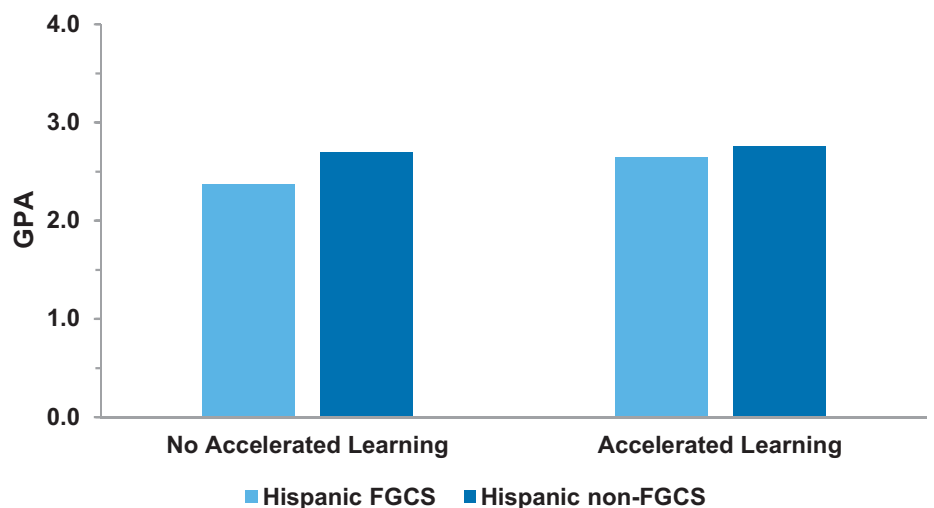


Figure 1. Average first-year cumulative college GPA by Hispanic FGCS status and accelerated learning

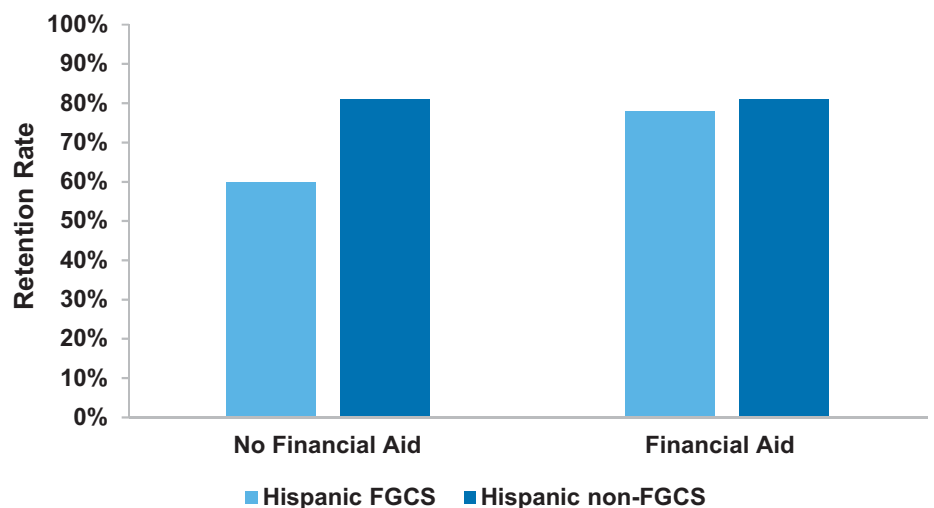


Figure 2. First-to-second year retention rate by Hispanic FGCS status and financial aid

As shown in Figure 3, the difference in the percentage of students earning 24 or more credits during their first year in college between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS was smaller among students receiving financial aid (34% vs. 48%) than it was among students not receiving financial aid (24% vs. 57%).<sup>18</sup> This finding suggests that financial aid was particularly beneficial for Hispanic FGCS as compared to Hispanic non-FGCS in accumulating the proper number of credits.

### Conclusion and Implications

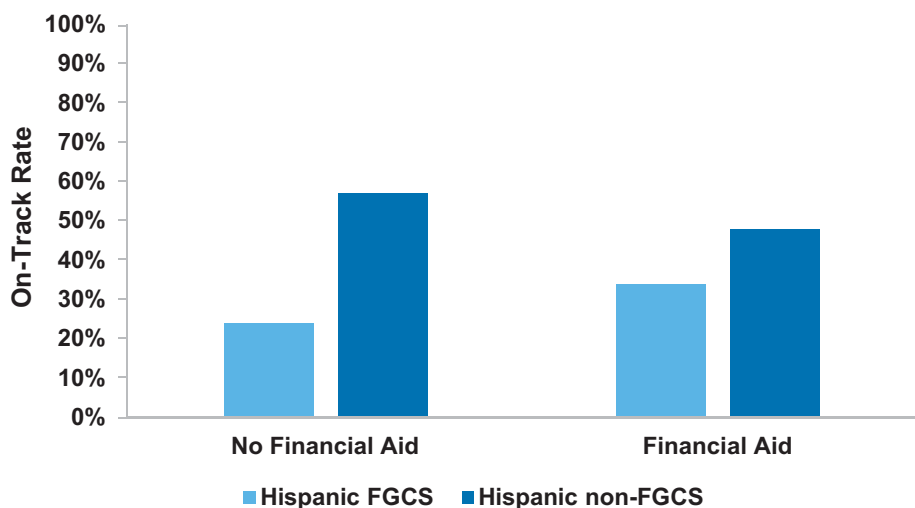
To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies that compares multiple first-year outcomes between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS. We found that Hispanic FGCS generally performed worse than Hispanic non-FGCS on all of the academic outcomes that we examined (first-year GPA, first-to-second year persistence, and earning at least 24 credits during the first year). With that in mind, the study also identified several supports that appeared to be related to enhanced performance and improved outcomes for Hispanic FGCS. Namely, we found that Hispanic students who

were FGCS and who had the benefit of accelerated learning in high school had higher first-year college GPAs than those who did not. We also found that Hispanic students who were FGCS and received financial aid persisted from first year to second year in college at higher rates and were more likely to be on-track toward graduation than those who did not. Moreover, participating in accelerated learning in high school was associated with reduced gaps in first-year GPA between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS, while receiving financial aid was associated with reduced gaps between Hispanic FGCS and Hispanic non-FGCS in first-to-second year retention and first-year on-track rate. These findings provide evidence to policy makers and practitioners that interventions that include exposure to accelerated learning opportunities in high school, and that improve access to financial aid for college, may be able to help Hispanic FGCS close attainment gaps. Because this study was conducted on data from only one institution and was not experimental in nature, additional research would be beneficial for confirming that these

supports can improve academic outcomes for this population.

### Notes

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**Figure 3.** First-year on-track rate by Hispanic first generation college student status and financial aid

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11.  $p < .0001$
12.  $p = .0451$
13.  $p < .0001$
14.  $p < .0001$
15.  $p = .6249$
16.  $p = .0001$
17.  $p = .3244$
18.  $p = .0207$