

Predictors of College Enrollment Among Latinx High School Students

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between psychocultural, sociocultural, college knowledge, and citizenship status factors on Latinx high school students' college enrollment. Participants included 307 Latinx ninth-grade students enrolled across four high schools in central Texas that were followed post–high school graduation. Results indicated that only receiving-culture acquisition and college knowledge were statistically significant predictors of college enrollment. Researchers provide implications for counselors and psychologists.

Resumen

Este estudio investigó la relación entre el conocimiento psicocultural y psicosocial universitario y los factores del estado de ciudadanía en estudiantes preparatorianos registrados para estudios universitarios. Participantes incluyeron 307 latinx (os/as) de tercero de secundaria inscritos en cuatro instituciones de educación superior en el centro de Texas, a quienes se les dio seguimiento después de su graduación de secundaria. Resultados indicaron que había dos predictores estadísticamente significativos de admisión universitaria: recibir adquisición cultural, e información universitaria. Investigadores proveyeron implicaciones para consejeros y psicólogos escolares.

Keywords

Latinx college enrollment, college enrollment, undocumented, acculturation, receiving-culture acquisition, heritage-culture retention

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Despite the increase in high school completion for Latinx students, college attendance continues to remain low with only 18.3% enrolling in 2013 (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). For undocumented students, it is estimated that 5% to 10% go on to college (Gonzales, 2007). College enrollment and the completion of a degree are crucial for students to achieve upward social mobility (Becerra, 2010). Although knowledge about and access to financial aid increase the likelihood of college enrollment (O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010), scholars suggest that social and cultural factors can also play a role (Heredia, Piña-Watson, Castillo, Ojeda, & Cano, 2016). As such, this study examined the influence of psychocultural, sociocultural, college knowledge, and citizenship status on Latinx college enrollment.

College Knowledge

For many high school students, knowing when to apply for college and financial aid or what grade is the best time to take college preparation courses can make the transition to college easier. College knowledge refers to an individual's understanding of the steps involved in successfully enrolling in college (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Although the link between financial aid literacy and college enrollment has been well established (Long & Riley, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2009), research on Latinx college enrollment tends to focus on financial aid literacy as an indicator of college knowledge. However, scholars note other areas of college knowledge that should be examined, such as academic preparation and understanding the college admission process (Long & Riley, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

Scholars have noted the importance of college knowledge for Latinx college enrollment (O'Connor et al., 2010; Sanchez, Usinger, & Thornton, 2015). For instance, in a study of Latinx high school students, O'Connor et al. (2010) found that parents with greater college knowledge scores had an increased likelihood that their child would enroll in college. Similarly, another study exploring college enrollment predictors found that the most commonly cited reason for Latinx students not enrolling in college was the perceived affordability. Furthermore, many study participants were unaware that they qualified for state and federal funding (Sanchez et al., 2015).

Although some school initiatives seek to provide students with complete information regarding the college admission process, there appears to be a gap between the information that is provided to the students and the information that is retained by the students. For example, Sanchez et al. (2015) found that Latinx students denied receiving financial aid information or college entrance information despite being part of a federally funded program that required students to attend workshops focused on college admissions. This suggests that although college information might be relayed to students, somehow it is not yielding meaningful, informative, or memorable information (Sanchez et al., 2015).

Psychocultural and Sociocultural Factors

Psychocultural factors, such as acculturation, have also been found to be related to college enrollment (Becerra, 2010). Acculturation is a process of psychological change

and involves two independent processes: receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). For Latinx students, the acculturation process unfolds as they balance the adoption of school cultural norms (receiving culture) with the maintenance of heritage-culture values and beliefs (Castillo, Conoley, & Brossart, 2004).

In a study exploring Latinx adults' perceptions of the barriers to college enrollment, Becerra (2010) found that individuals with higher levels of linguistic acculturation (i.e., receiving-culture acquisition based on English as the preferred language) were less likely to perceive tuition costs as a barrier to college enrollment. Similarly, Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, and Saldivar (2010) found that receiving-culture acquisition was related to Mexican American high school students' decision to apply to college.

Heritage-culture retention and its influence on college enrollment has not been clearly established (Castillo et al. 2010; L. Y. Flores, Ojeda, Gee, Lee, & Huang, 2006). Furthermore, studies examining educational outcomes or persistence have been mixed. For instance, in a study of Mexican American high school students' educational goals, L. Y. Flores et al. (2006) found that heritage-culture retention was not associated with educational goals. Similarly, a study of Latinx middle school students found that while receiving-culture acquisition was a significant predictor of educational outcomes, heritage-culture retention was not (Cano et al., 2012). Conversely, a study of Mexican American college students found that heritage-culture retention was significantly associated with academic persistence (Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Piña-Watson, 2014).

Sociocultural factors, such as family connectedness, have also been associated with Latinx students' educational outcomes (Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003). Scholars noted two types of family connectedness: allocentric and idiocentric (Lay et al., 1998). Family allocentrism refers to a collectivistic family value in which the person feels highly connected to his or her family, whereas family idiocentrism refers to an individualistic family value in which the sense of the self is derived independently from the family (Lay et al., 1998). The type of family connectedness may have implications on Latinx students' motivational, cognitive, and emotional experiences when it comes to college enrollment and completion (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Ponjuan, Palomin, & Calise, 2015). For instance, in a qualitative study with Latina college students, participants reported feeling stressed over the expectation to spend time with family and the necessity of focusing on completing schoolwork (Sy & Romero, 2008). During the college admission process, however, family support and family involvement were important positive predictors of college enrollment among Latinx students (Nuñez & Kim, 2012).

The limited information on the relationship between the type of family connectedness and Latinx student college enrollment is mixed. In a study of 4,977 Latinx high school seniors, Desmond and López Turley (2009) found that family allocentrism (measured by the preference to live at home to help the family) was negatively related to applying to college. Conversely, the Ovink and Kalogrides (2015) found that it had no significant effect. Using a national sample of 1,714 Latinx high school students and controlling for academic achievement and income, the study found that family allocentrism did not predict college application submission or attendance (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015).

Citizenship Status

Citizenship status has a direct impact on Latinx college enrollment and often serves as a barrier (Lazarin, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Ward, 2006). However, there are limited direct studies that examine the association between a student's documentation status and college enrollment. Scholars who study Latinx college enrollment and citizenship status note that about 25% of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have enrolled in college, compared with 53% of documented immigrants and 62% of U.S.-born citizens (Passel & Cohn, 2009). Although college enrollment rates among undocumented immigrants have increased in some states due to the passing of legislation that allows for in-state tuition, as is the case in Texas (Gonzales, 2007), limited access to financial aid resources (Gándara & Contreras, 2009), limited understanding or knowledge of available state funding (S. M. Flores, 2010), as well as the fear associated with immigration status disclosure (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Pérez, 2012) continue to be barriers that restrict undocumented students from enrolling in college.

Undocumented students tend to experience discrimination, which can impact their college enrollment, college choice, and psychological well-being (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016). For instance, a study of undocumented Latina high school students found that they experienced microaggressions that led to the internalization of feelings of academic self-doubt and inferiority, which in turn impacted the students' psychological well-being (Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012).

Present Study

As noted in the literature, research suggests psychocultural, sociocultural, college knowledge, and citizenship status are associated with Latinx college enrollment. Given that the research in this area is mixed and limited, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which these variables predict college enrollment. We hypothesized that receiving-culture acquisition, college knowledge, and family allocentrism would be positively related to Latinx students' college enrollment. We also hypothesized that documented students would be more likely than undocumented students to enroll in college.

Method

Participants

Participants included 307 Latinx students (males = 141, females = 166) from four high schools in Central Texas. Ages ranged from 13 to 17 years ($M = 14.5$, $SD = 0.5$). All participants were in ninth grade during the first wave of data collection. Schools identified 69 undocumented students. Most participants were from low-income families, as defined by their eligibility for free or reduced-fee meals under the National School Lunch Program (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2008).

Procedure

Data for this study were collected as part of an evaluation of a local Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) project. The data were limited to Latinx students who participated in the local GEAR UP program. The program worked in partnerships with school districts to increase students' readiness to prepare and enter postsecondary education. As part of the requirements to be GEAR UP eligible, schools must have 50% or more of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals under the USDA's National School Lunch Program. Permission from the Institutional Review Board of the university where the grant project was housed was obtained to conduct the evaluation. Data for this study were collected in ninth grade (college knowledge, receiving-culture acquisition, heritage-culture acquisition, and family allocentrism). College enrollment data were collected for this group of students the fall after high school graduation.

Measures

College knowledge. The Parent College Knowledge Mini-Test (Tornatzky et al., 2002) was used to assess students' college knowledge. This scale is composed of eight items regarding factual college knowledge. Possible responses include "yes," "no," or "don't know." The reliability estimate of the current study was .70.

Psychocultural factors. The Brief Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans—II for Children and Adolescents (Brief ARSMA-II; Bauman, 2005) was used to assess receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention. This scale is composed of two subscales, Mexican Orientation (MOS) which measures heritage-culture retention, and the Anglo Orientation (AOS) which measures receiving-culture acquisition. Responses are recorded in a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*almost always*). The reliability estimate of the current sample for both the AOS and MOS subscales were .79 and .92, respectively.

Sociocultural factors. The Family Allocentrism Scale (Lay et al., 1998) was used to assess components of family connectedness. The Family Allocentrism subscale consisted of 15 items, and the Family Idiocentrism subscale consisted of six items. Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For the Family Allocentrism subscale, higher scores suggested endorsement of allocentrism values. For the Family Idiocentrism subscale, lower scores suggested endorsement. Reliability estimates for the Family Allocentrism subscale and the Family Idiocentrism subscale were .91 and .64, respectively.

Citizenship status. Citizenship status was provided by school officials who identified undocumented students as those students who did not have a social security number. Citizenship status was dummy coded: (0) documented, (1) undocumented.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations, Means, and SD for Measured Variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Citizenship Status	—							
2. Gender ^a	.073	—						
3. Acculturation	-.164**	.168**	—					
4. Enculturation	.285**	.100	-.303**	—				
5. College Knowledge	-.026	.161**	.258**	-.072	—			
6. Family Allocentrism	.030	.075	.054	.036	.208**	—		
7. Family Idiocentrism	.038	-.086	-.113*	.085	-.062	-.201**	—	
8. College Enrollment	-.057	.108	.235**	-.083	.284**	.075	.023	—
M	0.22	0.54	3.1	2.2	3.0	53.3	16.5	0.31
SD	0.42	0.50	0.68	1.2	2.1	10.4	3.9	0.463

^aGender: 0 = male, 1 = female.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

College enrollment. College enrollment data from the fall of 2015 were obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse and were dichotomized (1 = enrolled, 0 = not enrolled).

Results

About 30% of the participants enrolled in college the fall semester after high school graduation (enrolled = 95, did not enroll = 212). Table 1 presents correlations, means, and standard deviations for the study variables. Correlation analysis showed that undocumented status was significantly related to higher levels of heritage-culture retention. Receiving-culture acquisition was significantly and negatively related to undocumented status. Being female was significantly related to receiving-culture acquisition and college knowledge. College enrollment was positively correlated to family allocentrism and college knowledge.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to assess which variables predicted college enrollment. A test of the full model against a constant only model was not statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between students who enrolled and did not enroll in college, $\chi^2 = (8, 307) = 9.8, p = .278$. Nagelkerke’s R^2 of .17 indicated a relationship between prediction and grouping. Overall, prediction success was 73.6% (29.5% for those who enrolled in college and 93.4% for those who did not enroll in college). The Wald criterion demonstrated that only receiving-culture acquisition ($B = .77, p < .01$) and college knowledge ($B = .263, p < .001$) made a significant contribution to prediction. Table 2 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis.

Discussion

In an effort to provide insight as to the factors that contribute to Latinx educational persistence, this study examined contributors to college enrollment. Correlational

Table 2. Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Enrollment.

Variable	B	SE B	Wald statistic	Exp(B)
Citizenship Status ^a	-.089	.342	0.07	0.915
Acculturation	.770*	.254	9.2	2.16
Enculturation	-.028	.119	0.06	0.972
College Knowledge	.263**	.066	15.8	1.30
Family Allocentrism	.007	.013	0.24	1.00
Family Idiocentrism	.045	.036	1.6	1.05
χ^2	9.82			
df	8			

Note. Citizenship status was provided by school officials who identified undocumented students as students who did not have a social security number.

^aCitizenship Status: 0 = documented, 1 = undocumented

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

results indicated that being Latina was associated with higher receiving-culture acquisition scores (e.g., speaking and reading in English) as well as having more knowledge about college. As supported by previous research, participants with higher levels of receiving-culture acquisition were more likely to have more college knowledge, whereas heritage-culture maintenance had no influence (Castillo et al., 2010; L. Y. Flores et al., 2006). However, participants who reported adhering to collectivistic family values had higher college knowledge scores. This supports previous research that suggests *familism* (a collectivism cultural value) and close connections to family can help Latinx students in the college decision-making process (Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Valdez, 2002).

As hypothesized, receiving-culture acquisition and college knowledge significantly predicted college enrollment. Results of the logistic regression showed that the odds of participants enrolling in college were 116% higher for participants with higher receiving-culture acquisition scores. Furthermore, having college knowledge increased the odds of college enrollment by 30%.

Family allocentrism and citizenship status did significantly predict college enrollment. This is contrary to the limited published research in this area (Nuñez & Kim, 2012; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). An explanation for this finding may be that because the participants were part of GEAR UP, a college readiness program, undocumented students were connected with resources to assist in college enrollment. Given the positive correlation between college knowledge and allocentrism, it is possible that family allocentrism may serve as a mediator and have an indirect effect on college enrollment.

Limitations

The results of the study should be interpreted in the context of some limitations. First, the sample for the study was limited to a small urban school district in Central Texas and may not be generalizable to Latinxs in larger districts or rural schools. A second

limitation is that all participants were part of the GEAR UP project which assists with college readiness. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to students who are not exposed to or participate in college readiness programs. Furthermore, GEAR UP projects vary in the types of college readiness programs offered as well as the selection of students chosen to include in such activities. For instance, some GEAR UP projects may be proactive in including undocumented students in program activities whereas others may not. Another limitation is that although Mexican Americans comprised the majority of the participants, we were unable to examine college enrollment predictors by Latinx ethnic subgroups. Finally, the acculturation measure used was limited in its ability to capture cultural value components. Given that the acculturation process is a complex, multidimensional construct that can influence educational factors (Castillo et al., 2010), future research should use scales that can evaluate the influence of the various dimensions on college enrollment.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study support previous research that variables beyond financial capabilities can influence Latinx students' decision to enroll in college. Findings suggest that college knowledge and receiving-culture acquisition are particularly important contributors to college enrollment. To aid in receiving-culture acquisition, counselors and psychologists could offer resources within the school and community to support English language acquisition. This could be offered to the family as a whole and to the adolescent. Resources might include workshops or participation in mentor programs. Ideal mentors would be Latinx college students, but another option would be seniors or juniors in the school who are college-bound and willing to share information about college and financial aid. Counselors could also connect families to share experiences and support families who might be skeptical or concerned about their students attending college.

Furthermore, as counselors and psychologists work with Latinx students and their families, college knowledge information should be shared. This includes information on financial aid options, high school courses that are aimed at preparing students for postsecondary education, college application procedures and deadlines, entrance exams and their corresponding fees, opportunities for fee exemptions, and immunization requirements. Given the Sanchez et al. (2015) finding that students do not always perceive this information as particularly meaningful at the time, professionals should follow up and offer information on numerous occasions. This information can also be shared through a mentor program.

The study findings may also have implications for other college preparation programs such as summer bridge programs. Most summer bridge programs focus on the development of study and time management skills, and introducing students to college services (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). A study of eight summer bridge programs in Texas found that participation did not have a statistically significant impact on college enrollment, suggesting there was no relationship between participating in the program and enrolling in college. However, results showed that

participation did impact completion of first-year math and writing courses (Barnett et al., 2012). Although college knowledge was included in these programs, many were limited to financial aid presentations and did not include family members. Given that participants who reported adhering to collectivistic family values had higher college knowledge scores, and college knowledge predicted college enrollment, summer bridge programs may consider including family members in the program such as by having a Parent Day or Parent Weekend, where information on college resources, tours of campus, as well as financial aid and budget management can be offered.

In sum, the findings provide useful information for educators and counselors working with Latinx students. By focusing on providing information about the college admission and application process, in addition to financial aid, Latinx students and their parents will be equipped to persist through the educational pipeline.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Marcia L. Montague is a visiting assistant professor in Special Education at Texas A&M University. Her research interests surround equity in access for individuals with disabilities and at-risk youth. Additionally, Dr. Montague engages in research and service activities centering on supporting the transition to postsecondary education for and the college retention of first-generation students.

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