

Learning to Increase Access to Higher Education in a New Latino Destination

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Abstract

Barriers to higher education persist among the Latino population across the United States. This project (IRB approval 18-001240), framed within the Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy at East Carolina University, aimed to identify the obstacles to accessing higher education faced by the local Latino community and evaluate some ways to make higher education opportunities more accessible for Latino students. Although cultural barriers are low, lack of financial resources and knowledge should be in the center of an intervention.

Keywords: education, university, Latino/a, university-community collaboration



Going to college has historically been considered an important step to achieve social change. However, access to college or university in the United States is not equal, with Latinos and African Americans representing some of the lower percentages in higher education, particularly in North Carolina (where this study took place), despite a growing population. The Latino population in North Carolina is one of the fastest growing ethnic groups: According to *Excelencia in Education* (2021), North Carolina has the 14th largest Latino population in the United States. In Pitt County in eastern North Carolina (where the authors were located), the Latino population from 2011 to 2017 recorded a growth rate of 30%, higher than the 26% experienced by this ethnic group statewide, consolidating this county over time as an important destination for Latinos in North Carolina (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). In Pitt County, however, only 18% of Latino adults have a bachelor's degree or higher; in contrast, 44% of all adults in the county have some college credits (Data USA, 2021). In addition, the Latino enrollment in East Carolina University and Pitt Community College—the two main institutions of higher educa-

tion in the region—represents only about 8% of the total number of students (*IPEDS data feedback report 2020* and *Data USA. East Carolina University*) which suggests that it is important to increase efforts to make higher education more accessible to Latino youth in order to meet the growing demand that will continue as long as current levels of migratory flow of Latinos to Pitt County are maintained.

Considering this information, this article presents the results of the project *Barriers to Higher Education Among the Latino Population in Pitt County*, which was developed by East Carolina University (ECU) and Grady-White Boats/E.R. Lewis Family Unit Boys and Girls Club (referred to as the Grady-White Club) to understand and combat barriers to higher education among the Latino community. The project received IRB approval (18-001240) in August 2018, renewed and amended as needed. East Carolina University, located in Greenville, North Carolina, in the eastern part of the state, forms a part of the UNC 16-campus system. ECU is a leader in eastern North Carolina, particularly in medicine, education, and business. In fall 2018 enrollment was 28,718 students, with 23,010 as under-

graduate students. Seventy-seven percent of these students were enrolled full time. Hispanics/Latinos of any race accounted for 6.3% of the student body. Among executive administration, faculty, and staff, Hispanics/Latinos were 2.6%. Although the Latino population in the state, in particular in the eastern part of the state, has increased over the last decade and more, the university has yet to see an increase in percentages among the student body and the employees. For this reason, it was deemed necessary to apply a more concerted effort between the university and the community to increase access to higher education.

The main purpose of this project was to understand the perceived barriers to accessing higher education faced by the local Latino community and to evaluate some ways those barriers can be overcome to make higher education opportunities more accessible for Latino students. To do this, a research team was developed over an academic year consisting of, from the university, one faculty member, two graduate students, and three undergraduate students (one of whom formed a part of the group for one semester only). On the community partner side, the unit director from the Grady-White Club and the vice president for program initiatives formed a consistent part of the team. It was and continues to be the intent of this community-university partnership to understand better the barriers to access to higher education in the Latino community and to begin to implement interventions that would counteract these barriers.

This article is organized into sections as follows: synthesis of the literature; a description and the development of the project; methodology of the project; the results and analysis of the survey; conclusions and recommendations; and future of the project and future research.

Literature on Barriers to Higher Education in the Latino Community

The relevant literature is divided into different areas. One body of literature considers the issues that define the barriers to access to higher education among Latino communities and surveys the communities to understand the perceptions and experiences of the Latino community. Another body of literature reviews current programs that attempt to eliminate the barriers and can serve as models for other communities.

Barriers to Higher Education in the Latino Community

We will first consider the literature on the most important barriers faced by Latino students to access higher education in the United States.

Parental Knowledge

Although the empirical works show that Latino parents recognize the importance of higher education and motivate their children to continue their studies, they lack the information and knowledge to navigate the U.S. educational system. The chief obstacles are their lack of proficiency in English and their low educational level. However, even in the case of first-generation parents who have obtained bachelor's degrees in their home countries, it is difficult to understand the different options of higher education in the United States and the requirements to access it (Castellanos et al., 2013).

Lack of Financial Resources

The majority of Latino families have low incomes that make higher education seem unattainable. Additionally, in some cases, although parents understand the importance of higher education, they encourage their children to work and contribute financially to the family. Likewise, the lack of knowledge of the U.S. educational system makes them overestimate the cost of higher education, and they do not know where to look for financial aid (Bohon et al., 2006; Castellanos et al., 2013).

Low Interaction Between Parents and Schools

Although in recent decades the United States has experienced a growing migratory flow of Latinos, school systems have not responded adequately to the needs of this population. In most cases, school personnel do not recognize the parents' language barriers, their limited understanding of the institution, and their complicated work schedule. Therefore, teachers and counselors have stigmatized Latino parents as lacking interest in their children's education, while parents experience alienation and a sense of not being valued within the school system (Castellanos et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2013). Conversely, schools need to adopt alternative concepts of parental engagement as outlined in the digital home model (Gil, 2019). In this model, learning is transformational because people's different

strengths are taken into account and used to frame the relationship.

Role of Peers

Although peers may be important motivators for continuing postsecondary education, research has shown that in the case of Latino students, this is not necessarily true, since by sharing similar characteristics such as low income level, low educational level of parents, and lack of information, this group of peers is not particularly encouraging. The empirical research has shown that peers discourage one another because they promote the idea that it is not necessary to study to be successful and it is better to work than to enter higher education (Clark et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Language Barriers and Acculturation

As mentioned previously, one main barrier for Latino parents is that they may not be proficient in English, which makes it difficult to access information and have closer contact with teachers and administrators. In the case of students that are first generation, language is a particular barrier in facing tests such as the ACT and SAT that are necessary to apply to higher education (Becerra, 2012).

Although these are the most important and widely seen barriers to accessing higher education, it is important to consider the heterogeneity of the Latino population. Aspects such as nationality, citizenship status, and generational status intensify these barriers and make it difficult to generalize about the entire Latino population. It is also important to bear in mind that many of these barriers are faced not only by Latino students, but also by other underrepresented minority groups. Therefore, they cannot be attributed exclusively to the fact of being Latino, but they respond to the dynamics of a system in which the less privileged groups face more difficulties to access higher education (Gonzalez, 2015).

Literature on Overcoming Barriers

As mentioned above, another body of literature reports on programs that have been implemented to attempt to eliminate barriers to access to higher education. This sometimes consists of acknowledging that parents and students do not know the appropriate steps to take to access universities and recognizing the resulting need to design

interventions that acculturate families into this system (Arriero & Griffin, 2018).

Additionally related are other programs that attempt to increase access among the Latino community to other areas. This can be seen in studies that evaluate programs that join language skills to health care through community sites (Soto Mas et al., 2015). Fernandez (2018) studied community engagement among Latino residents to improve health outcomes to show that a close connection is needed to overcome distrust. Although these programs' aims differed from ours, their analysis points to the effectiveness of community-based programs within Latino communities.

Development of the Project

This project has been developed within the framework of the Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy (EOSA) belonging to the Office of Community Engagement and Research at East Carolina University. EOSA exists to educate faculty on community-engaged research and to support a community-engaged research project. Faculty members selected for this program participate in cohort-based workshops on community-engaged research to then develop a research project with a community partner over an academic year. Once the project is designed by the faculty member and the community partner, the project is subject to Institutional Review Board review. When a project is approved, graduate and undergraduate students are assigned to work on the EOSA project and participate in the Student Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy.

This project emerged from the first author's work in her home department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and in the Honors College. As a professor of Hispanic studies, she worked for many years at ECU with heritage speakers of Spanish, usually of Latino descent. A heritage speaker is a speaker of a language who learns it at home and usually has little to no formal education in the language. The language proficiency of these speakers exists on a spectrum of ability. In eastern North Carolina, there are more and more heritage speakers of Spanish, many of whom would be first-generation college students. However, as seen in the statistics, many of these students are not accessing higher education. This disconnect is what led to this project.

The main purpose of this project was to understand barriers to accessing higher education faced by the local Latino community and how those barriers can be overcome to make higher education opportunities more accessible for Latino students. The project had two objectives:

- identify barriers to access to higher education among the Latino community in eastern North Carolina via an anonymous survey and
- evaluate the efficacy of interventions for addressing barriers to accessing higher education among the Latino population in eastern North Carolina.

To develop this project a partnership was established between the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Coastal Plain and East Carolina University. This partnership evolved between the two because of a shared interest in better serving the local Latino community to succeed in postsecondary education. The Boys and Girls Club has worked for 45 years in eastern North Carolina promoting different activities for young people in the areas of education and career development; character and leadership development; health and life skills; arts and culture; and sports, fitness, and recreation (Boys & Girls Clubs of the Coastal Plain, n.d.). Annually they serve about 1,300 youth through membership and community outreach in the Club's 17 facilities throughout the region. For this project we worked specifically with the Grady-White Boats/E.R. Lewis Family Unit, which is in Greenville, North Carolina and is the club with the greatest number of Latino participants of any of the three clubs in Pitt County.

The partners mutually determined the research problem and framed the research design. The Grady-White Club assisted the project in several ways, including recruiting participants for the surveys and the intervention, providing space to administer the surveys, and transportation for participant tours of postsecondary institutions. For its part, East Carolina University contributed to the design and administration of surveys, data management, analysis of survey responses, and the development of interventions based on survey data.

Methodology

The project had two phases. In the first

phase—developed during fall semester 2018—the purpose was to identify the perceived barriers to higher education among the Latino population. In the second phase the objective was to design short- and long-term interventions to address the barriers to higher education identified in Phase 1.

Phase 1

To achieve the first purpose of the study, a structured survey was designed and administered to Latino youth and their parents. Using a convenience sample given the characteristics and objectives of the project, the criteria to select the target population were that the participants were attending the Grady-White Boats Boys and Girls Club, were middle or high school students, and identified themselves as Latinos. In this way, the sample for this project consisted of 11 Latino students and 10 parents. All students were born in the United States; nine parents were born in Mexico and one was born in the United States. Thus most of the students were part of the second generation of immigrants.

For students, the questionnaire included 39 questions about demographic characteristics, education, preparation for college, and aspirations and perceived barriers to higher education. To prepare the questionnaire, we referenced different quantitative studies that have investigated the Latino population in the United States as well as the educational barriers experienced by Latino youth in this country. For the demographic section specifically, we adapted questions from *Latino National Survey 2006* (Hu-Dehart, 2015), which included questions related to demographic characteristics such as ancestry, birthplace, education level, marital status, and use of the English language. Additionally, we worked with some questions included in the article “Achieving the College Dream? Examining Disparities in Access to College Information Among High Achieving and Non-High Achieving Latina Students” (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Regarding education questions, we used those included in the Current Population Survey (Flood et al., 2021). Meanwhile, for the preparation for college aspirations and perceived barriers to higher education, we selected and adapted questions from “Sex and Ethnic Differences in the Perception of Educational and Career-Related Barriers and Levels of Coping Efficacy” (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001), whose authors developed

a Likert scale instrument to measure the perceived educational and career-related barriers among a group of Latino undergraduate students.

For parents, the questionnaire included 40 questions that incorporated the same topics that their children were asked, with additional questions related to income and household size. In this case we took as a reference the same sources mentioned above and adapted questions from “How Mexican Parents’ College Knowledge, Perceptions, and Concerns Influence the Emotional and Behavioral Support of Their Children to Pursue Higher Education” (Castellanos et al., 2013), to explore the aspirations and perceived barriers to higher education among the group of parents.

In both cases, the respondents had the opportunity to respond to the questionnaire in either English or Spanish, and both surveys were evaluated by the Center for Survey Research at East Carolina University prior to the IRB approval and use.

Phase 2

In the beginning of the project, we projected that in Phase 2 we would evaluate the efficacy of interventions for addressing the identified barriers to access to higher education among the Latino population in Eastern North Carolina. This intervention would be designed based on the analysis of the survey results and the identified needs of the students and their families.

After analysis of the survey results, in this phase, the research team designed three different pamphlets on the following topics: types of higher education, applying to institutions of higher education, and how to pay for higher education. We translated these texts into Spanish and solicited input from the community partner, the students and the parents we had surveyed, and another community organization closely tied to the local Latino community (AMEXCAN). While receiving feedback from the students and their parents, we took photos of the students that we would include in the pamphlets. Our objective was to distribute these pamphlets at a visit to the local community college and university. Additionally, we gathered branded items such as pens and cups from both campuses and purchased copies of *Mi Voz, Mi Vida: Latino College Students Tell Their Life Stories* (Garrod et al., 2007). All these items were given to the students on the day

of the campus visit. The day consisted of a tour of each campus together with a talk from Admissions. Additionally, students ate in one of the university’s dining halls and met with university students. The objective of this visit to both campuses was to encourage students to see themselves at a university as well as to understand what they could study when they arrived.

Results and Analysis of the Surveys

In this section, we discuss the results and analysis of the surveys and then subsequent steps in the development of the project.

Demographic Characteristics for Parents and Students

As shown in Table 1, most of the parents who completed the survey were Latina women. This is consistent with observations from the project fieldwork that, in these homes, mothers are responsible for the care of the children and therefore for accompanying them in both academic and extracurricular activities.

The average age of the parents is 38. Five are married, three are not married but live with a partner, and two are single. All nine mothers were born in Mexico and on average have lived in the United States for 19 years. In the years since their first arrival in the United States, none of them have left the country. In terms of citizenship, only one of the mothers is an American citizen, two are DACA recipients, two identified themselves as undocumented, and four preferred not to respond, which may suggest that they are also undocumented. Of the students, five of the respondents were male and six female. They ranged in age from 11 to 17 years with a mean age of 12. All reside with their parents, and all report their relationship status as single. In contrast to their parents, all the youth were born in the United States; therefore, all of them are American citizens who have lived in Greenville most if not all of their lives.

Regarding the size of the household, most are nuclear families with four people on average, the average number of people under 18 years of age is two, and in all cases, school-age people are currently studying. The average age of this population is 10 and most of them are in middle school. Considering that the poverty guideline for a household of four people in the year 2018

Table 1. Frequencies of Demographic Characteristics for Parents and Students

Variables	Parents (N = 10)		Youth (N = 11)	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Male	1	10%	5	45%
Female	9	90%	6	55%
Mean age in years	38		12	
Marital status				
Married	5	50%	0	-
Not married but living together	3	30%	0	-
Single	2	20%	11	100%
Born in the United States				
Yes	1	10%	11	100%
No	9	90%	0	-
Citizenship Status				
American Citizen	2	20%	11	100%
DACA recipient	2	20%	0	-
No legal status/undocumented	2	20%	0	-
Prefer not to respond	4	40%	0	-
City of residence				
Greenville	9	90%	10	91%
Grimesland	1	10%	1	9%
Years in the United States	Min: 16 Max: 27		Min: 11 Max: 17	
Years living in current town	Min: 2 Max: 26		Min: 1 Max: 17	

was \$25,100, it could be said that 80% of these families live below the poverty level (Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2019).

Education of Parents and Students

The results of the survey revealed that the educational level of the parents is relatively low. Half of them did not complete high school, two finished high school, two earned a GED, and only one parent has an associate’s degree. In the case of the students, 10 of them are in middle school: four in sixth grade, three in seventh, three in eighth.

Only one of the students is in 12th grade.

Nearly all students (80%) reported they had not received academic counseling in their schools, and only three reported having received some training or preparation for applying to college/university. However, these forms of preparation seem to be isolated actions and not articulated in a program of preparation for college. Regarding the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) and ACT (American College Test)—typical exams students take to apply to higher education—only the student who was in 12th grade had taken the ACT. The rest of the students,

since they were in middle school, had not yet received preparation for these tests nor taken them yet, but most expressed their intention to do so. On the other hand, only three students responded that they had received specialized English courses (ESL) at school for children who speak other languages.

Both parents and students were asked about the future educational aspirations for the children. In the case of the students, they were asked what the maximum educational level they aspire to is, and the parents were asked how far they think their children will go academically. Even though most of the parents and the students had high aspirations, the children had higher aspirations than their parents since six of them aspired to receive a graduate or advanced professional degree and four of them aspired to graduate from a 4-year institution. Meanwhile, six of the parents aspired for their children to graduate from a 4-year institution, two expected their children to get an associate degree, and two of them aspired for their children to attend some semesters of college.

Perceived Barriers to Higher Education

In order to identify the perceived barriers to higher education, parents and students responded to different statements measuring their agreement on a Likert scale. (These statements were adapted from “Sex and Ethnic Differences in the Perception of Educational and Career-Related Barriers and Levels of Coping Efficacy,” Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001). First, these results show that both parents and students are aware of and understand the importance of education; however, though most parents think that entering college is easily achievable, the children think the opposite and that there are difficulties in achieving it (see Table 2).

In regard to the different opportunities of getting into college/university—sources of information, as well as requirements that are needed to be admitted to a higher education institution—most of the parents have a lack of knowledge whereas, in contrast, most of the students responded that they know. However, since most students are in middle school and have not received preparation for college application, it is possible that they have partial or superficial knowledge.

In terms of financial resources, only a few

parents and students stated that they don’t have enough money to attend college/university, though this may be due, in part, to the lack of knowledge of the costs of higher education. On the other hand, the number of parents that know the different funding sources is very low; in contrast, most students claim to know them, which again is not consistent considering that they have not had preparation for applying to college. Factors associated with being Latino or being a woman are not recognized as barriers to accessing higher education by either parents or children. Likewise, most of the parents think that their children are adequately prepared and have the mathematical and language skills needed to attend college, similar to the students.

Regarding parental and family support, all parents stated that they support and encourage their children so that they can reach the goal of entering university, and all the children perceive that support since they agreed with these statements. Additionally, the results suggest that neither marriage nor having to work are a priority for the children or their parents, and therefore these factors are not perceived as barriers to accessing higher education. Finally, other actors who play an important role as support for entering college such as teachers and friends also have had a positive perception within this group of children: All the students acknowledge that their teachers support and encourage them to enter college, and the vast majority affirmed that their friends also plan to attend college, which constitutes an important motivation for them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the desire of students and parents to access higher education and although from the cultural point of view the perception of barriers is low, there are important obstacles that prevent Latino students from achieving their goal of accessing higher education. A first barrier is the economic one. As was presented, most of the families surveyed in our project live in poverty conditions, and with the level of income reported, it is very difficult for them to pay the high costs of higher education. Although there are financial aid options that students could access because they are American citizens, their parents could not apply because they are mostly undocumented. This will affect the level of support awarded.

Table 2. Frequencies of Responses Agreeing With the Statements Related to Barriers to Higher Education

	Parents		Youth	
	N	%Yes	N	%Yes
You do not need to attend college/university to be successful.	2	20%	2	18%
Getting into college/university is easily attainable.	6	60%	4	36%
I know the different opportunities that exist for students to enter college/university.	3	30%	11	100%
I know where to look for information about how to enter college/university.	3	30%	10	91%
I know the requirements that are needed to be admitted in a college/university.	3	30%	8	73%
I do not think I have enough money to attend college/university.	3	30%	3	27%
I know the different funding sources that help students to enter college/university (scholarships, loans, etc.).	3	30%	8	73%
Because I am (my child is) Latinx, I have (he/she has) less chance of attending college/university.	0	0%	2	18%
Because I am (my child is) a woman, I have (she has) less chance of attending college/university.	0	0%	1	9%
I feel I am (my child is) not prepared enough to be successful in college/university.	2	20%	2	18%
My (child's) English level is not high enough to attend college/university.	2	20%	3	27%
My (child's) Math skills are not high enough to attend college/university.	1	10%	0	0%
My parents (I) encourage me (my child) to attend college/university.	10	100%	11	100%
My family (I) supports me (my child) to continue my (his/her) studies.	10	100%	11	100%
I (my child) will not attend college/university because I have (my child has) to work to help my family.	0	0%	0	0%
I (my child) will not attend college/university because my (child's) priority is to get married and start a family.	1	10%	0	0%
I don't know anyone close who has attended college/university.			1	9%
My closest friends plan to attend college/university.			8	73%
I feel like I don't belong in college/university.			0	0%
My teachers don't encourage me to attend college/university.			0	0%

The second barrier is associated with the lack of knowledge of the educational system of the United States. Most parents do not know the different options (college, community college, university) and also do not know what the requirements are to be admitted. On the other hand, although their children said that they do know, considering their ages and educational levels, they may know the generalities but not in detail everything that is required to access higher education. This lack of knowledge puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

The discrepancies described above are linked to the lack of preparation for college received so far. Although most of the students are in middle school, it is nonetheless important that they already start to receive college preparation, which should be accompanied by vocational training so that the young people can identify their professional interests. Once the students have identified their career interests, they can start a focused process of academic preparation that allows them to be more successful in their application to college. These forms of preparation can also enable them to apply for scholarships that otherwise might present lost opportunities because the students lack the academic performance required.

Based on the survey results and after discussing these findings with the Grady-White Club, an intervention was recommended in the short and long term. In the short term, the intervention that was proposed consisted of compiling the basic information on types of higher education, applying to higher education, and funding sources in order to prepare three documents both in English and in Spanish that were delivered to the students surveyed. Additionally, a visit was made with the students to Pitt Community College and to East Carolina University so that the students could get to know these facilities, the admission process, and the services offered by these institutions. This visit was particularly important to give the students a physical experience that would enable them to visualize their futures on a college campus. Additionally, this experience included eating at the dining hall and meeting with university students who had similar paths to their own.

Beyond Phase 2: Future of the Project and Future Research

The analysis of these surveys led to the second phase of this project—developed in spring semester 2019 and outlined above—where we attempted to design an intervention that would respond to the survey results. Although these are important first steps for this issue, it is clear that we need to expand our understanding of the issues and our intervention beyond this initial group of students. After careful consideration, we have decided to survey more students and their families, as well as understand the needs of teachers and guidance counselors working with Latinx students. At this point we are revising the survey for students and families and creating another survey for educators. We plan to administer this survey to a much wider audience beyond the Boys and Girls Club chapter. After receiving and analyzing these results, we will be able to plan a more expanded intervention for students and their families, as well as advise schools and universities.

To make the project sustainable into the future, we want to partner with College of Education faculty to widen and strengthen our impact. Doing so will also help us find financial support so that we can propose and enact educational interventions with other schools or organizations.

The analysis of barriers to access to higher education among the Latino population is a relevant issue, considering the growing number of Latinos in the United States and the need to increase the percentage of Latinos who obtain an associate's degree or higher, currently at 22% (Excelencia in Education, 2021). Additionally, it is important to analyze the factors that may hinder access to higher education in regions like Pitt County that have been understudied in the past.

In that sense, for future research, it would be important to include Latino students with profiles different from those in the sample: for example, those born outside the United States, those born in the United States to parents also born in the United States, youth who have dropped out or never been enrolled in school, and so on. In this way, the possibilities of analysis could be extended, which in turn would facilitate identifying the effects of the different processes of acculturation and assimilation on the perception of barriers to higher educa-

tion. Likewise, other ethnic groups should be included in the sample to determine if the perception of barriers to higher education is different for Latinos.

Although we are proud of the potential of these accomplishments with this club, we understand the limited scope of working with one club and want to expand this initiative to other Boys and Girls Clubs in Pitt County and to expand the Boys and Girls Clubs' reach to connect better with the local Latinx population. To that end, we aim to

widen the collaboration beyond this particular club to include AMEXCAN—a Latinx advocacy organization in Pitt County—or other Latino community organizations in the county, in order to better understand the Latinx community and create appropriate interventions that will serve the community. Through this wider collaboration, we want to strengthen our connection to the community and double the number of students and families that will benefit.



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