Low Completion Rates of Latinx Community College Students

Christine Burshnick Genthe
New Jersey City University
cgenthe@njcu.edu

Christine Harrington 🆔
New Jersey City University
charrington1@njcu.edu

ABSTRACT

Completion rates for Latinx students are unacceptably lower than White and Asian students (NCES, 2019). Shapiro et al. (2017) reported that the completion rate for Latinx students attending community colleges was 33%, while the completion rate was 45% for White students and 44% for Asian students. This literature review aimed to discover the root causes of these low completion rates for Latinx students. Having a deep understanding of the factors that contribute to low success rates can enable community college professionals to take action to improve success outcomes and reduce equity gaps. Based on this systematic literature review of 24 peer-reviewed articles and five public scholarship articles, the following root causes emerged: financial barriers, lack of institutional support, educational preparation, psychosocial considerations, and familial and cultural issues. Recommendations for institutional actions are provided.

KEYWORDS

Latinx, community college, persistence, completion, graduation

INTRODUCTION

Latinx are the largest and second fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). They comprise 18.5% of the total population, compared to Whites at 60.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Educational attainment among Latinx has been shifting in recent years, echoing the group's growth in the nation's K-20 pipeline (Bauman, 2017). Over the past decade, the Latinx high school dropout rate has fallen, and college enrollment has risen, but Latinx students fall behind other groups in earning a degree (Krogstad, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019).

Although the increased high school completion rates and college enrollment rates are promising, the data show Latinx students still have the lowest high school completion rate and are the least likely to pursue higher education compared to Black and White students (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017). Only 45% of Latinx students who enrolled in any type of college or university earned a degree or certificate within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). The completion rate for Latinx was 10% higher than Black students but considerably lower than White and Asian students (67% and 72%, respectively).

Latinx are more likely than any other race to attend a two-year institution or a community college (Adelman, 2005; Martinez & Fernández, 2004). Almost two-thirds (65%) of Latinx students initially enroll in certificate or associate degree programs, compared to 42% of Whites and 52% of Blacks (Radwin et al., 2018). However, many Latinx community college students do not complete the required

coursework and, therefore, leave college without a degree. Comparing the completion rates of different racial/ethnic groups at two-year public institutions, researchers found Latinx and Black students were lower than White and Asian students, 33% and 26%, compared to 45.1% and 43.8%, respectively (Shapiro et al., 2017).

The purpose of this literature review is to determine the factors that contribute to this problem of practice. Specifically, through this review of the extant literature, the obstacles affecting the Latinx community college students' persistence rates are identified. The findings from this review provide community college practitioners with the knowledge required for actions needed to improve success for Latinx students. These disparities in educational outcomes must be addressed to provide economic security for Latinx students and close the achievement gap.

METHOD

A systematic literature review of peer-reviewed research was used. This type of review, which focused on identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing original research related to discovering the factors that contributed to low success rates for Latinx students, reduced bias in the selection and inclusion of original research studies (Petticrew et al., 2006). The research structured around determining the root causes of low persistence and completion rates of Latinx community college students allows the researcher to utilize conditions to determine if a study should be included or excluded in the synthesis (Green et al., 2006). This technique helps make sense

of large amounts of information and identifies themes within the original research (Petticrew et al., 2006).

An internet search for gray literature was also utilized to conduct this literature review. Gray literature, or data not published in commercial journals, can make important contributions to a literature review (Paez, 2017). Open-access reports, for instance, often provide valuable data and recommendations (Mahood et al., 2014).

Peer-Reviewed Research

In early August 2020, 44 electronic databases were searched for relevant studies. The search utilized all the databases available to the researcher at the time. The databases included: Educational Research Databases, Academic Search Premier, Academic Search Ultimate, Alt HealthWatch, America: History & Life, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Biography Reference Bank, Biological Abstracts, Business Source Elite, Business Source Premier, Business Source Ultimate, CINAHL Plus, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Education Source, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, European Views of the Americas: 1493 to 1750, Funk & Wagnalls, GeoRef, GreenFILE, Humanities & Social Sciences Index Retrospective, International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center, Legal Information Reference Center Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, Literary Reference Center, MasterFILE Elite, Middle Search Plus, Points of View Reference Center, Primary Search, Referencia Latina, Regional Business News, Small Business Reference Center, and Teacher Reference Center.

All peer-reviewed articles available in full-text research conducted prior to August 2020 were considered for review. The initial search terms included "Latinx" OR "Latinos" OR "Hispanics" OR "Chicanos" OR "Latinas" OR "Mexican" AND "persistence" OR "retention" OR "graduation" OR "resilience" AND "community colleges" OR "two-year colleges" OR "junior colleges." The initial search resulted in 305 articles, and 167 duplicates were removed, yielding 138 articles to review.

Each study identified from the above process was reviewed. Studies were eliminated for failing to meet one or more of the criteria. The following criteria were used to identify studies to be analyzed, critiqued, and summarized: (a) the subject of Latinx community college students in the United States was the sample group or a subsample, (b) addresses academic persistence, resilience, retention, or graduation, (c) addresses obstacles in academic persistence, (d) peer-reviewed, and (e) available in full-text.

The entries were scanned for appropriateness to the topic of Latinx community college students and persistence. The screening applied the inclusion criteria to the titles and abstracts and resulted in excluding 45 articles. Of the excluded articles, 29 (64%) were not focused on Latinx community college students in the United States, ten (22%) did not address obstacles in academic persistence, four (9%) were evaluations of an intervention program, and two (4%) were nonempirical articles, such as a book review or comments to the editor. Ninety-three articles remained for review.

The remaining 93 articles were investigated further through a more comprehensive article review. This round of identification applied the inclusion criteria to the methods, results, and conclusions and resulted in the exclusion of 70 additional articles. Of the excluded articles, 34 (49%) did not address obstacles in academic persistence, 18 (26%) were not focused on Latinx community college

students in the United States, 13 (18%) were evaluations of an intervention program, and five (7%) were nonempirical articles, such as a book review, literature review, or comments to the editor. One additional article was discovered using the "snowballing" technique, a method of scanning the reference lists of full-text papers to identify sources not already identified (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). Twenty-four articles remained for review.

Public Scholarship

To reduce publication bias and to discover research available in open access scholarship formats, an Internet search was conducted to identify pertinent research not published in the selected databases (Paez, 2017). A general internet search was performed as well as a search of organizational websites thought to publish works related to the topic at hand. Similar criteria used in the database search were also applied to the public scholarship pieces. The research had to meet the following criteria to be included: (a) the subject of Latinx community college students in the United States was the sample group or a subsample, (b) addresses academic persistence, resilience, retention, or graduation, and (c) addresses supports or obstacles in academic persistence. The organizations' websites search included Achieving the Dream, American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Community College Resource Center, Educational Policy Institute, Excelencia in Education, Higher Education Research Institute, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, League for Innovation, Pew Hispanic Center, Pullias Center for Higher Education, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, and UnidosUS. This internet search provided five additional sources. These five sources combined with the 24 articles identified from the database search yielded a total of 29 articles to be analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of the methodologies utilized revealed a majority (62%) of the studies used qualitative methods, 34% used quantitative methods, and one study (3%) used a mixed-method approach. The qualitative studies relied heavily on interviews and focus groups, while the quantitative studies used a variety of surveys, including the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (Alfonso, 2006; Carales, 2020; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Museus et al., 2011).

A thematic synthesis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) of the 24 peer-reviewed articles plus the five public scholarship pieces was conducted to identify common themes among the 29 documents. All 29 documents focused on barriers Latinx community college students encounter that decreased student success and college persistence. After examining the selected literature, five categorical themes emerged: a) financial barriers, b) lack of institutional support, c) educational preparation, d) psychosocial considerations, and e) familial/cultural issues. These factors were identified as contributing to the low persistence and completion rates for Latinx students. Many of the barriers discussed are interconnected within and among the categories and affect Latinx community college students who simultaneously experience them.

Financial Barriers

The Latinx community faces numerous economic challenges. Their median household income is about 74% that of Whites, and

they are 1.7 times more likely to live in poverty than Whites (Fontenot et al., 2018). The poverty rate for Latinx was 18.3 percent in 2017, down from 19.4 percent in 2016; however, Latinx continue to be overrepresented among the population in poverty (Shrider et al., 2021). Thus, Latinx rely heavily on financial support to attend college. Furthermore, low-income Latinx experience financial literacy challenges, making it difficult to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and to understand financial aid forms and processes (Rendón et al., 2012).

Socioeconomic conditions are related to the educational experience of Latinx students. Inadequate finances were cited most frequently as a huge barrier to persistence (Dulabaum, 2016; Harris, 2017; Harris et al., 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Negron-Gonzales, 2017; Pena, 2013; Sáenz et al., 2017; UnidosUS, 2020; Weissman et al., 1998; Zell, 2010). Most of these studies were concerned with tuition expenses and the lack of adequate financial aid; however, Harris et al. (2017) also refer to the financial burden of the cost of living expenses and non-tuition items (e.g., rent, food, books). In interviews with Latinx first-generation college students, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) discovered transportation issues were also considered an obstacle for these community college students. Gross et al.'s (2014) quantitative research of Indiana's public postsecondary institutions confirmed a lack of financial resources was a barrier to academic access and persistence.

Many Latinx students work while enrolled in college to avoid incurring debt (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Harris et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2009; Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Weissman et al., 1998). However, Carales (2020) found being a loan borrower increased the odds of earning a certificate or an associate's degree. Research shows that working while attending school can negatively impact success. A quantitative analysis of academic resilience by Perez et al. (2009) indicated lower persistence rates with higher employment hours.

The Latinx population is especially vulnerable to job losses and unemployment due to their disproportionate numbers in lower-salaried jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In a press conference on April 29, 2020, Jerome H. Powell, chairman of the Federal Reserve stated, "unemployment has tended to go up much faster for minorities, and for others who tend to be at the low end of the income spectrum." (Federal Reserve Board, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified the problem. A majority of the Latinx workforce, including those attending community college, is employed in industries such as retail, hospitality and food, construction, and service occupations in the professional and business sectors (Kochhar, 2014). These same industries had the highest unemployment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Unemployment rates for Latinx went from 4.2% in August 2019 to 10.5% in August 2020. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Thus, essential part-time work has been challenging for Latinx students, especially in recent times.

Another tactic Latinx employed to reduce the college financial burden was enrolling part-time (Alfonso, 2006; Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Weissman et al., 1998). Historically, part-time enrollment has had lower persistence rates (O'Toole et al., 2003; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). The most favorable outcomes, degree completion and transfer to a four-year institution, among part-time students are associated with students who tend to enroll term after term with few breaks (Crosta, 2014). When Latinx college students had an interruption to their education, Alfonso (2006) discovered they were less likely to complete their associate degree. Socioeconomic factors are tied to outcomes of Latinx community college students.

Lack of Institutional Support

The qualitative literature provided details of students' criticisms of their institutions. Their criticisms included: poor or misinformed advising practices, unhelpful personnel, lack of personnel knowledgeable in immigration status policies and procedures, inconsistent information from support services, intermittent engagement by faculty, and lack of Latinx professors (Alfonso, 2006; Dulabaum, 2016; Eberly, 2018; Jabbar et al., 2019; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2008; Zell, 2010). Negrón-Gonzales (2017) recounted incidents of students being turned away at their local community colleges because they did not have a social security number. Jabbar et al. (2019) provided details from a Latinx, first-generation college student's experiences with academic advising, who described "feeling 'on his own'" (p. 7) during the college transfer process. Zell (2010) reported that 16 out of 17 Latinx community college students interviewed had trouble accessing information and support from academic advisors. For many of Zell's (2010) participants, the relationship with their advisors was one of the most difficult aspects of their college experience.

Personal connections mattered. Alfonso (2006) found Latinx students attending institutions that enroll between 2,001 and 10,000 students were less likely to complete a certificate program, earn an associate degree, or transfer to a four-year institution than students attending schools with 2000 or fewer students. This suggests that smaller institutions may be providing a more personal experience and doing a better job of aiding social and academic integration (Alfonso, 2006). Along with student enrollment numbers, the racial makeup of an institution's student body appeared to influence success rates. Museus et al. (2012) concluded that the ingroup representation of Latinx students on campus positively correlated with persistence. In addition to connecting with faculty and staff in general, Latinx students want to specifically connect with Latinx faculty and staff. As such, the low number of Latinx educators, from pre-school through college, is an obstacle hindering the success of Latinx students (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2008).

Latinx faculty in higher education are in short supply. In 2017, only 4.7% of all faculty identified as Latinx, which is not much of an improvement from 4.4% in 2015 (NCES, 2018). Hagedorn et al. (2007) indicated that Latinx faculty on campus can promote a sense of belonging and social integration among Latinx students. For students to prosper, diversity should be found in the student body, the faculty, and throughout the college campus community.

Educational Preparation

A student's ability to thrive in college depends on pre-college educational factors: content knowledge, core academic skills, non-cognitive skills, and knowledge about the college selection process (Roderick et al., 2009). Latinx students' academic performance during high school was repeatedly found to be related to college grades and persistence. Students who reported feeling academically underprepared, not feeling ready for college, or who were required to take remedial courses had lower persistence rates or declared these as barriers to overcome (Alfonso, 2006; Dulabaum, 2016; Gross et al., 2014; Pena, 2013; Risco et al., 2019; Sáenz et al., 2018; Santiago & Stettner, 2013).

Students also cited that the lack of high school guidance on what to expect during the transition from high school to college was problematic (Pena, 2013; Sáenz et al., 2018). Latinx students often experienced academic difficulties which required them to learn and institute new study skills (Harris, 2017; Pena, 2013). One student in Harris's (2017) study commented, "what I used to know about studying went out the window" (p. 118). Lastly, Crisp and Nora (2009) examined pre-college factors relating to persistence and found not immediately enrolling in college after high school decreased the odds that a student would persist, transfer, or earn an associate degree. The education received prior to college can adversely affect the first-year experience for many Latinx community college students.

Psychosocial Considerations

Psychosocial factors include the mental, emotional, and social aspects of attending college. During their time in college, Latinx community college students in these studies experienced stress related to the transition to college, a struggle with self-efficacy, and encountered many negative emotions related to discrimination and racism. These psychosocial factors negatively impacted their ability to successfully complete degree requirements.

Many college students, including Latinx, find it difficult to transition from high school to college (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Harris, 2017; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Pena, 2013). Adjusting to a new setting was identified by students as being stressful and another hurdle to overcome (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Martinez-Vogt, 2017; Pena, 2013). Stressful life events, including the transition to college, along with coping methods used to manage the stress were considered obstructions to persistence. Harris (2017) cited stressful life events as a deterrent to student success. Certain coping mechanisms, such as drug and alcohol use, had a significantly negative impact on the college persistence rates of Latinx students (LeSure-Lester, 2003).

Perceived self-efficacy, or one's perception of their ability to achieve a goal successfully, has been recognized to impact academic achievement. Latinx participants in Zell's (2010) and Dulabaum's (2016) research revealed low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and doubts about succeeding in college as barriers faced during college. Others mentioned fear as a stumbling block, which ultimately prevented students from accessing support services (Jabbar et al., 2019; Weissman et al., 1998).

Discrimination and racism affected the well-being of Latinx students and could severely affect college success rates. Several studies presented data illuminating the effects of racism. Normalization of the majority culture further marginalized Latinx students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Racism added to feelings of loneliness and withdrawal and was an impediment to retention and persistence for Latinx students (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Martinez-Vogt, 2017; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Perez et al., 2009; Zell, 2010). Low persistence rates were attributed to Latinx students feeling as though they do not belong in predominately white institutions, where they were often subjected to microaggressions and blatant acts of discrimination from students and faculty alike (Pena, 2013; Zell, 2010). Undocumented students frequently experienced a non-hospitable campus environment which produced increased feelings of societal rejection (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Perez et al., 2009). In spite of the unwelcoming campus environment, Martinez-Vogt (2015) reported Latinx females who had experienced racism and stereotypes on their community college campus used their frustrations as motivation to persist and achieve academic success.

Familial and Cultural Issues

Latinx places a strong emphasis on family as the major source of ones' identity and protection. The term used to describe this cultural value is "familismo." Familismo refers to the "importance of strong family loyalty, closeness, and getting along with and contributing to the well-being of the nuclear family, extended family, and kinship networks" (Ayón et al., 2010, p. 3). This can be a substantial source of support for Latinx community college students; however, it can also be challenging for students. Balancing family and school life, contributing to the family's well-being, and having numerous family responsibilities led to decreased class time and study time. Student participants in several studies reported family obligations, responsibilities, or expectations, such as attending family functions or taking care of siblings, as interfering with their ability to be successful in college (Alfonso, 2006; Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Dulabaum, 2016; Harris et al., 2017; Longwell-Grice, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2017; Sáenz et al., 2018; Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Tovar, 2015; UnidosUS, 2020; Weissman et al., 1998).

According to Pew Research Center (2015), more than half of the Latinx parents surveyed said it was extremely important for their child to earn a college degree as opposed to only 34% of White parents. Latinx parents strongly believe that a college degree is essential to becoming part of America's middle class. Specifically, 49% of Latinx parents believed this, compared with 43% of Black parents and only 22% of White parents (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, in a study examining Latinx men and their fathers, conflicting messages regarding postsecondary education were reported by the sons (Sáenz et al., 2017). One student noted: "he wants me to finish college but at the same time he wants me to work. He wants me to do both" (Sáenz et al., 2017, p. 101). Latino men often feel strain related to being caught between their academic responsibilities and their familial obligations to contribute to the household.

Of all Latinx college students, nearly half (48%) were identified as first-generation college students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018). Being the first in the family to attend college leaves the student with limited knowledge about how the higher education system works and how to navigate it. Having limited knowledge from their families on how to traverse the community college environment proved to be challenging to Latinx students (Alfonso, 2006; Perez et al., 2009; Sáenz et al., 2018; Santiago & Stettner, 2017; UnidosUS, 2020).

College professionals and staff often base their actions on student development theories anchored in separation-individuation theories that do not embrace or encourage a significant parent or family involvement (Sax & Wartman, 2010). Sax and Wartman (2010) reported that Latinx students were most likely to report that their parents were not involved enough with interactions with college professionals, course registration, or college activities. Despite the role Latinx families could play in the success of their community college students, there is little to no family engagement on the part of the colleges. These aforementioned elements can be detrimental to student success even in the light of the Latinx supportive culture.

In a study that examined Black and Latinx males, Dulabaum (2016) identified factors that limited success which were unique to

Latinx students. Latinx students in the study identified language as the major barrier to their success in higher education. Students also mentioned the lack of bilingual materials, tutors, teachers, advisors, and counselors who are prepared to work with Latinx students as disappointing (Zell, 2010). Witkowsky et al. (2018) shared the importance of using the Spanish language to communicate with parents and families but noted that "Spanish information coupled with culturally relevant content provided by faculty and staff from similar cultural backgrounds creates the trust and desire to remain connected the campus" (pp. 9-10).

CONCLUSION

The number of Latinx students in higher education is increasing, and many Latinx students begin their postsecondary education at a community college (Adelman, 2005; Martinez & Fernández, 2004; Radwin et al., 2018). Despite increasing enrollments, persistence, graduation, and transfer rates have remained low (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017). Obstacles abound for Latinx students. This literature review comprised of peer-reviewed journal articles and public scholarship provided insight into the obstacles and factors that contribute to low completion rates. Barriers, such as finances, limited academic preparation, lack of institutional support, psychosocial factors, and family and cultural issues interfere with Latinx students' postsecondary plans, often forcing them to drop out without reaching their goals.

First, Latinx students face significant financial barriers. Almost 20% of Latinx families live in poverty (Fontenot et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many of the strategies Latinx students employ to combat financial challenges, such as working and attending school part-time, can result in lower completion rates (Alfonso, 2006; Perez et al., 2009). Not feeling academically prepared combined with a lack of support during the transition process to college also decreases the success rates for Latinx students (Sáenz et al., 2018). Latinx students also reported that it is difficult to access the support they need from professionals on campus and that there are too few Latinx faculty and staff to turn to when needed (Jabbar et al., 2019; NCES, 2018). Latinx students experienced an array of negative emotions and a lack of self-efficacy when they experienced stressors and were victims of discrimination and racism, and these factors significantly impacted their performance and success (Pena, 2013; Zell, 2010). Finally, although Latinx parents believe in the importance of earning a degree, family responsibilities are of paramount importance (Harris et al., 2017; Sáenz et al., 2017; Sáenz et al., 2018; Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Tovar, 2015; Weissman et al., 1998). Thus, many Latinx students have competing responsibilities. Complicating matters, nearly half of Latinx college students are considered first-generation college students, and their families are, therefore, unable to provide them with navigational capital or the skills and abilities to navigate educational institutions (Yosso, 2005).

Findings from this systematic review of the literature indicate a combination of financial, institutional, educational, psychosocial, and familial/cultural barriers have been shown to affect one or more of the student persistence outcomes for Latinx community college students. These issues are not isolated events; they are all interconnected and experienced simultaneously by Latinx students. Understanding the factors that impact educational success for Latinx students is imperative to pinpoint interventions that will make a difference. Hence, this literature review provides community college leaders and practitioners with a synthesis of the research on an important problem of practice: the low retention rate of Latinx community college students.

Armed with a strong understanding of the barriers facing Latinx college students, community college leaders and practitioners can determine institutional strategies that directly address these barriers. For example, colleges can address financial barriers by providing support with completing the FAFSA, scholarship applications, and other financial aid opportunities and offering students on-campus job opportunities. One critically important strategy that can address the lack of institutional support barrier is for community colleges to hire and support more Latinx faculty and staff (Hagedorn et al., 2007; Harris, 2017). In addition, leaders need to facilitate dialogues to address discrimination and racism (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Harris et al., 2017; Martinez-Vogt, 2017; Zell, 2010). Colleges will also need to improve the overall quality and quantity of support offered to students, especially during the transition to college (Eberly, 2018; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Tovar, 2015; Zell, 2010). Thus, providing students with the support needed to build their self-efficacy and coping strategies.

To address the lack of educational preparation, colleges can strengthen partnerships with P12 school districts and expand college readiness and dual enrollment opportunities for Latinx students (Mehl et al., 2020). Given the critically important role of the family in the Latinx community, community colleges will want to find a way to partner with parents and family members as they strive to better support Latinx students. Well-intentioned leaders and practitioners in the community college sector who do not have a strong understanding of the problem often engage in efforts that do not lead to the desired results. It is hoped that this review of the research will provide a solid foundation for leaders and practitioners to engage in actions that will lead to improved retention rates for Latinx students.

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