

# Analyzing the Retention of Latine Students From a Public Health Lens

Stephanie Bautista

## Introduction

*“Higher education has an enormous responsibility for our society’s well-being ... Education determines not only earning capacity but also the very quality of human life. Even longevity is correlated with educational achievement. In the broad sense of how well we live our lives - both individually and collectively - higher education is a public health issue.” (Davies, 2001)*

Gordon Davies articulates the significant impact higher education has on society’s well-being in his 2001 opinion article, “Higher Education is a Public Health Issue.” The article addresses how education, and its economic implications, have the ability to improve the quality of an individual’s life. Davies provides an example in the state of Kentucky, wherein specific regions that have low education attainment also have low per-capita income, high chronic diseases, and high poverty rates. This demonstrates that education does have a significant impact on the future of someone’s quality of life. More recently, the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion released their Healthy People 2030 objectives, which are public health priorities aimed to better the state of well-being for individuals across the United States. Healthy People 2030 set five domains of social determinants of health, which are the conditions in the environment people live which can affect their health and quality of life (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2023). One of their domains currently is education access and quality, which focuses on enrollment in higher education. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion noted that higher education can lead to better health outcomes and reduce an individual’s chance for premature death. It was stated that Hispanic

students, along other students of color, face systematic barriers to enter and complete higher education; yet, as a country, we should aim to address these barriers to ensure all communities are provided equal education which can result into a better quality of life (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2023). As a result, we as practitioners should begin to view higher education as a public health issue.

Students of color continuously face systemic barriers, racism, and additional unique challenges as they try to navigate the U.S. educational system. Due to this, it is important to retain students of color within our higher education system to lower health discrepancies and quality of life barriers. As student affairs professionals, we should pay attention to the holistic impact education can make on a student's life. As someone who identifies as Latina and has studied both public health and higher education, I had an overlapping interest in researching minority health and education. This literature review will focus on the retention of students of color, particularly Latine students, in the U.S. higher education system. The focus on Latine students is to see how ethnicity and culture may influence a student's ability to complete college, which is particularly relevant as the *2021 Persistence and Retention* report found that the Latine retention rate has declined the most out of all racial groups examined in their 2019 cohort (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Education is one small piece in the collective system of moving up within society and having the chance of a high quality of life. In this literature review, we will assess the research findings on Latine student retention rates and conclude with recommendations on how to improve the educational outcomes of Latine students.

### **Terminology and A Brief History on U.S. Educational Pipelines**

To begin we will be looking at students who are of Hispanic origin. According to the United States Census Bureau, Hispanic origin is viewed as the heritage, nationality, lineage, or

country of birth of the individual or individual's ancestors before arriving in the US, those who are of Hispanic origin may identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

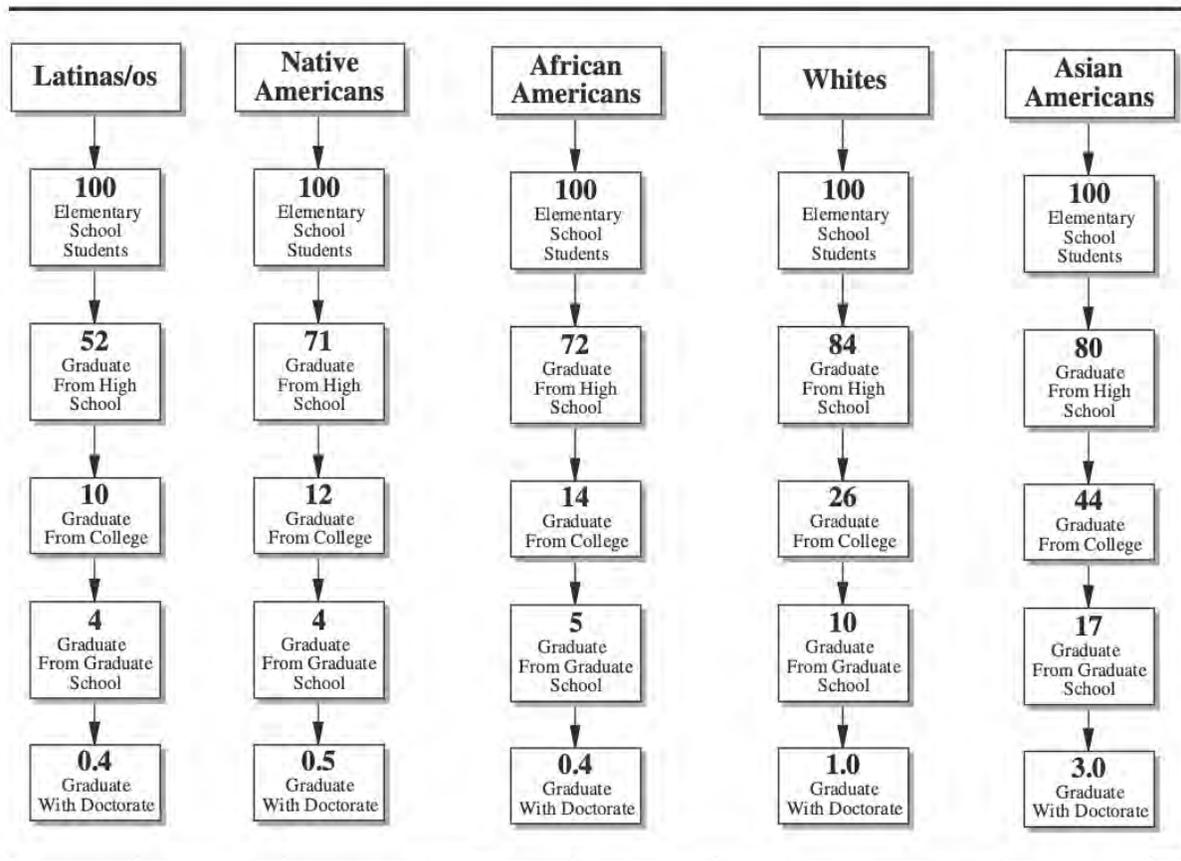


Figure SEQ Figure \* ARABIC 1 - The U.S. Educational Pipeline from Solorzano et al. (2005)

For this paper, we will use the word Latine to describe students within this community. In the United States, as of 2021, Latines make up 19% of the U.S. population, approximately 62.5 million people (Krogstad et al., 2022). Due to the growing Latine population within the U.S., there is also an increase in the number of Latines with college experience; between 2010 and 2021, the population of Latine college students increased by 1.2 million (Krogstad et al., 2022). Additionally, we will be looking at retention rates for this student population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, retention rates measure the percentage of first-time undergraduate students who return to the same higher education institution the following Fall (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Before we begin to explore the retention rates of Latines in U.S. higher education it is important to look at where education begins—the K to 12 pipelines. Sólorzano et al.'s article (2005), “Educational Inequities and Latina/o Undergraduate Students in the United States: A Critical Race Analysis of Their Educational Progress,” found that at any point of the education pipeline, Latines do not perform as well compared to their counterparts. Sólorzano et al. noted that Latine students are among the largest racial groups in the U.S but have the poorest education transition rate among all other racial groups; this can be seen in Figure 1 (Sólorzano et al., 2005, p. 277). The impact of inequities of educational attainment on academic preparation and schooling conditions through the U.S. education system should be considered as we look at the impact on college retention rates of Latine students. It is vital to acknowledge that low college retention rates start from low academic preparation within the K-12 system.

### **Literature Review**

Before we further investigate the retention rates of Latine students, it is important to look at the overall problem of retention rates in higher education. Lang (2001) in “Student Retention in Higher Education: Some Conceptual and Programmatic Perspectives” revealed critical research findings and concerns with college student retention. Lang noted four significant factors for improving minority student retention at primarily white institutions: presence of well-defined minority group retention policy, high levels of institutional commitment, comprehensive services provided to minority students like recruitment and counseling, and a dedicated staff and strong faculty support to diversity efforts to assist in the retention of minority students (Lang, 2001). Lang continued that the major factors impacting this student community: low retention rates, poor academic preparation at the elementary and secondary school level, lack of financial-aid resources, problems in transitioning into college, family circumstances, and lack of adequate student support services (Lang, 2001). Lang concludes with programmatic efforts that institutions can implement to ensure minority student retention, such as pre-college

programs, bridge programs to assist in the transition from secondary school to college, mentoring programs between faculty and students, development education programs to provide basic educational skills like spelling and math, specialized counseling and academic advising for students at risk of dropping out, and special student services like tutoring or study skill development (Lang, 2001, p. 225). Lang's article highlights the historical research findings in students of color retention and what is necessary for institutions to provide in order to lower their attrition rates, these findings are still relevant today.

The retention rate of Latine students is increasingly becoming a national priority within the United States. Kelly et al.'s 2010 report revealed national findings on the obstacles Latine college students face and what institutions are doing to retain them. Their report found that on average 51% of Latine students graduate from an undergraduate college in six years compared to 59% of white students (Kelly et al., 2010). This discovery is meaningful as it demonstrates that Latine students historically lag behind their peers. Kelly et al. noted that policy changes can help improve Latine graduation rates by enforcing free pre-orientation programs which focus on student immersion to college life, enforcing mandatory academic advising, and getting rid of late registration holds (Kelly et al., 2010, p.4). Kelly et al. brings to light how institutions can better support students in this community. Institutional support can also be seen in Montalvo (2013) study which found that retention and graduation rates can improve if institutions shift the way they recruit students. Montalvo (2013) stated there were key themes to successful recruitment and retention of Latine students: recruitment pipelines for underrepresented students, recruitment outreach designed for underrepresented populations, recruiters who have the knowledge and skills to engage with Latine students, spreading recruitment information bilingually, relationships between social and cultural capital, policies that offset the costs of a college degree, and compassionate faculty and administration (p. 249-250). Both Kelly et al. (2010) and Montalvo (2013) found that Latine attrition is not caused by their own inabilities, but

clearly due to institutional and systemic barriers. Both studies found that institutions can be doing more to assist in the retention of students of color.

A question that emerged when reviewing the literature was why certain institutions were better at retaining Latine students compared to others. Montalvo (2013) conducted a study to assess if certain public universities were better at recruiting and retaining Latine undergraduate students. The study found that economic capital, like financial aid and cost of attendance, was a significant determinant in the recruitment and retention of Latine undergraduate students. This can be supported by Kelly et al.'s (2010) findings of that financial challenges were a significant obstacle for Latine students when it came to their ability to succeed in college. More specifically, between 60 to 65% of Latine students were working a minimum of 30 hours while being a full-time student (Kelly et al., 2010, p.15). This demonstrates the magnitude by which financial stress impacts students of color in their ability to successfully complete college. These findings are still relevant as Smathers et al.'s (2022) article, "The Relationship Between Financial Stress and College Retention Rates" found that 78% of students agreed that they felt stressed about their personal finances. Through further investigation of the 78% of students who reported feeling stressed, 12.7% revealed that the financial stress is enough to make them decide to take a break, drop out, or transfer to a different college (Smathers et al., 2022, p. 12). This is a critical finding as financial stress and challenges determine a student's decision in completing their college education.

Furthermore, there are research studies that analyze racial demographics and college retention rates. Matthews (2010) examined the differences between White, African American, and Latine students who continued their education beyond their freshman year. More specifically, the study measured retention differences by gender, race, and type of institution. During this study, Matthews focused on four areas that past literature deemed important for student retention: peer group interactions: faculty concern for student development and

teaching, academic development, and institutional/goal commitment (p. 135). The study was conducted in six different Texas universities where 159 students at each university were interviewed, and there were 318 students within each demographic group. Matthews found that Hispanic and African American students were more influenced by peer group interactions to persist in college compared to their White counterparts. Additionally, the study found that Hispanic and African American students were influenced by institutional/goal commitment when it came to their persistence after their first year of college (Matthews, 2010, p. 136-137). This literature helps reveal that peer group interaction and institutional/goal commitment had a significant impact on the persistence of students of color in continuing their college education.

A form of peer group interactions that can assist in the improvement of Latine student retention is peer mentoring or coaching. Identity based peer mentoring programs have been found to be extremely beneficial to the retention of Latine students. Alcocer and Martinez (2018) stated that a peer mentoring program can assist in retaining Latine students as the mentoring process helps disseminate resources, allows students to observe and learn from someone who was once in their shoes, allows students to converse with someone who understands their culture, and overall contributes to their sense of belonging on campus. The success of peer mentoring was found in a study at a Texas Hispanic Serving Institution for students pursuing a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics degree. Cruz et al. (2021) collected GPA data for students in the peer-mentoring program and students in a control group, their analysis of GPA found that there was a 0.5 increase in GPA for students who were in the coaching program (p. 378). Overall, Cruz et al. (2021) found that their identity-based peer coaching program allowed their students to achieve academic success as this peer-to-peer interaction created both a social and academic support system. Peer interactions overall allowed students to feel supported in multiple facets of their life.

Lastly, O'Hara's (2022) study, "Latino Student Retention: A Case Study in Perseverance and Retention," provides insight into a more recent data analysis of Latine student retention. O'Hara conducted a single case study of a first-generation male Latino college student at a four-year liberal arts college in New England. O'Hara discloses in their problem statement that this case study was conducted as the National Center for Educational Statistics acknowledged the retention challenge for men of color (O'Hara, 2022, p. 317). O'Hara highlights key themes in their case study findings. The first was to 'burst the bubble': the participant spoke of the sheltered cultural environment some Latines are raised in which prevents them from learning how to become independent (O'Hara, 2022, p. 321). By bursting their bubble and stepping outside of their comfort zone, the student can better integrate and succeed within a college setting. Secondly, to put oneself first: the study found that in Latine culture, it is uncommon for a young person to think and put themselves first. More specifically, the participant spoke of traditional role expectations that imply Latino men must financially support their family as soon as they are able to (O'Hara, 2022, p. 323). It points out the importance of having a support system, like guided mentorship, in and out of school for the development of self-esteem and leadership. Furthermore, the study found that it is important to have institutional support like ongoing transitional orientation programs for Latine students and their families. It was found that having these institutional supports linguistically accessible is extremely impactful for a student and their family. These key findings help demonstrate the unique and complex stressors this community faces due to cultural expectations and traditions and offers solutions to better welcome Latine students to campus.

O'Hara ultimately notes the significance of culture that may influence Latine students. O'Hara (2022) mentions the notion of "familismo", which is the cultural belief that "the demands and needs of the family and extended family frequently take precedence over the needs and desires of the individual" (p. 316). The cultural influence that the belief of family loyalty or

traditional gendered expectations which Latine students experience does influence whether a student will persist in the higher education system. An individual's family, culture, and beliefs are important to consider when we look at their retention rates and what resources we put out for these students. Overall, this study helped show that throughout the years, even as research has continued to delve into the focus area of Latine student retention, culture is a significant stressor that impacts a student's ability to continue their education. This helps demonstrate that there is still more significant work to be done not only among higher education professionals but also policy makers to help lessen these educational discrepancies.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review helped reveal key points regarding the retention of Latine students within the U.S. higher education system by providing multiple corroborating points of how economic challenges, cultural differences, types of institutional support and commitment impact Latine students' retention rates. Lang (2001), Montalvo (2013), and Kelly et al. (2010) mentioned how economic challenges and lack of financial aid negatively impact the ability of a Latine student to continue their education. Through this finding, we recommend that individual institutions should consider implementing more aid or resources for students of color. Additionally, the literature has shown that generational financial stressors inhibit Latine students in completing their education. Providing more monetary aid and resources like free meals, book stipends, and pipeline programs can help remove a systematic barrier that further prohibits students of color from closing the education achievement gap.

Another recommendation to help improve the retention rate for Latine students is to improve the campus racial climate. Research has found that colleges with harsh racial climates have a negative impact on the retention of minority students (Solorzano et al., 2005, p. 285). Hurtado et al. (1999) stated that a campus can improve its racial climate by having campus stakeholders reflect on their campus's current handling and its history of diversity and inclusivity,

enhancing the retention of students of color on their campus, addressing the concerns and perceptions of various student groups, and working towards improving student inter- and intra-group relations. Institutions can improve this for Latine and other students of color by providing culturally responsive academic support or advising. In doing so, university administrators can foster relationships with students of color by acknowledging their backgrounds, strengths, and needs, and using this background to support them and guide them through their educational journey.

A final recommendation is that future research should continue looking at how student retention and degree attainment for Latine students can benefit health outcomes. Health equity within the U.S. is something we as a country are continuously working towards. Higher education is a piece in the larger puzzle that is achieving universal health equity. Communities of color, like Latine students, face constant systemic barriers that influence their everyday life. As student affairs practitioners by creating more institutional resources for these students and dismantling barriers that prevent their educational success, we are working towards improving the quality of life for this community of students. Ultimately, as the U.S. student demographic continues to rapidly grow and change due to the increase of young Latines in the country, our college campuses will need to adapt to best support them.

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