



INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP & POLICY

California State University, Sacramento | August 2009 | www.csus.edu/ihe

Research Brief

Retaining Latino College Students: Conclusions from the Literature

Overview

This document summarizes a longer, critical review of the literature about retaining Latino and non-Latino college students. It highlights those findings that are best supported by earlier studies, emphasizes where further research is needed, and offers recommendations.

The Public Policy Issue

While enormous attention has been devoted to access to higher education for minority group students, concern has also been raised about high drop-out rates for such students who make it to college. In particular, scholars have stressed that although there has been a steadily rising number of Latinos entering higher education, Latinos continue to be significantly less likely to persist to a baccalaureate degree. This problem not only has negative implications for the earning potential and quality of life of Latinos themselves but bodes poorly for the nation as a whole. If current trends persist, the United States will continue to fall behind other nations in education levels and will be greatly disadvantaged in the global economy. The negative social implications in California are especially notable given its large Latino population and prior research emphasizing high drop-out rates in major state institutions of higher education.

Well-Supported Findings

What findings emerge as the most well supported in the literature, given the problems identified? Focusing especially on findings from carefully designed comparative research, we can be most confident of the following conclusions:

(continued on reverse)

Limitations of Existing Research

Although much of value has been learned about Latinos and college retention, the existing literature is plagued with two problems:

First, much of the scholarship does not make clear exactly how ethnicity might explain differences in college retention. There is a need to distinguish among arguments that:

- 1) ethnicity per se does not matter, but rather the retention gap results from underlying differences in socio-economic conditions across ethnic groups;
- 2) cultural differences across ethnic groups at least partly influence college retention; and
- 3) the reaction of the larger higher education community toward students from different ethnic groups, or campus climate, influences retention.

These varying arguments have different implications for efforts to reduce the gap in college retention rates.

Second, many of the existing studies fail to compare Latinos to other students. While such studies may be interesting and suggestive, they cannot yield valid conclusions about how ethnicity affects retention. For example, in the absence of comparative research demonstrating otherwise, it is possible that something found to be a particular challenge for Latino students (e.g., meeting parental expectations about finishing college) may equally be a problem for other students.





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- The gap between Latino and non-Latino college students is real, with Latino students continuing to be less likely to complete a baccalaureate;
 - The relatively low average socio-economic characteristics of Latino college students has a variety of negative effects on their college retention, including greater likelihood of charting a more circuitous route to a college degree and exposure to greater fiscal stress;
 - For reasons that likely include but may not be limited to low average socio-economic status, Latinos students tend to enter college with less social capital than non-Latinos, and this negatively influences college retention;
 - Given Latinos' relatively high financial need, if a greater portion of Latino students were to receive financial aid it would likely reduce the gap in college retention between Latinos and non-Latinos; and
 - The retention gap is partially explained by Latinos being relatively less prepared when entering college, which is likely due in part to their receiving a lower quality K-12 education on average.
- Does campus climate influence differences in retention rates across ethnic groups? Many scholars hypothesize that this is the case, but the limited amount of comparative work suggests that campus climate may have similar effects on all groups. That is, a climate that is not welcoming to Latinos may be unwelcoming to students generally. More such comparative studies are needed to be definitive in this regard.

Recommendations for Reducing the Retention Gap

Drawing on the well-supported findings for the argument that underlying differences in socio-economic conditions rather than ethnicity per se are at the root of the retention gap, we can confidently offer two recommendations:

- Increase the portion of Latino students receiving financial aid
- Strengthen general efforts to increase retention because Latino students will likely enjoy a disproportionately large benefit from such efforts

Areas in Need of More Research

The review of the literature indicates that more rigorous, comparative research is needed to answer the following questions – to test the validity of the 2nd and 3rd arguments noted previously:

- Do cultural differences help explain the gaps in college retention rates between Latinos and non-Latinos? Some existing research is highly suggestive in this regard, but we lack studies comparing members of different groups with respect to such matters as pressure to obtain employment.

Contact Information

Professor Edward (Ted) L. Lascher, Jr.
Department of Public Policy and Administration
California State University, Sacramento
Sacramento, CA 95819-6081
tedl@csus.edu

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