

Voces: First Generation Latinx College Students Discuss Their Support Networks

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Purpose

The goals of this project are to explore the networks of support that students create throughout the completion of their degree and the role that their families play in the process. This research will take place in a public university in Fairfield County, Connecticut. This location was chosen because the majority of Latinx college students attend public universities (Figure 3) and the chosen institution has 45% first-generation students and 55% students of color (UConn Facts - UConn Stamford).

Introduction

As of July 2017, the Latinx population made up 18.1% of the country's total population, making it the largest ethnic minority group in the USA (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). The rate of college enrollment of Latinx students has increased dramatically in recent years. In the last decade alone there has been an 82% increase in Latinx students aged 18-24 enrolling in colleges and universities across the US (Treschan and Lew 2018). This rise, coupled with the low graduation rates discussed in the literature review, contribute to the growing need for research on Latinx students.

Although quantitative data exists regarding the number of first-generation college students (Cataldi et al. 2018), and that a great portion of Latinx students are first-generation (Factsheets First-Generation College Students 2018), these numbers do not give insight into the particular obstacles that Latinx students face while enrolled in college. My qualitative research focuses on examining the obstacles Latinx students face during their undergraduate education as well as the informal and formal networks of support they access prior to and after enrollment in college.

Researching the lives of first-generation Latinx college students requires an interdisciplinary approach and cultural knowledge. Non-Latinx researchers who study undergraduate Latinx students can be culturally insensitive and may lack the necessary information in order to accurately understand students' experiences in college (Amaury et al. 2018). It is necessary to study a multitude of factors that shape Latinx students' experiences. With a median household income for Latinx families in 2016 of \$49,675 (U.S. Census Bureau 2018) it is important to consider the number of low-income Latinx students who work while also being enrolled at college. Gender may also play a role in the obstacles students face toward degree completion, as seen with 26% of US-born Latinas not completing their undergraduate degree (Treschan and Lew).

Research Design

My research focuses on the social context under which these students study and live as members of their families and their greater college community. It is important to collect qualitative data through in-depth and in-person interviews with students. The questions I created are designed to learn the ways in which informal and formal networks of support, socioeconomic status, and other factors shape student's academic success while in college. These questions will give students an opportunity to discuss their motivations for attending college and the obstacles they have faced. My goal is to interview 10-15 self-identified Latinx college students.

The interviews will be audio-recorded using a recording device and will be transcribed by me on as close as possible to the completion of each interview to ensure accuracy. Transcription will occur on a password protected computer that only I have access to in order to preserve the anonymity of the students. Names and identifiable information will also be changed to protect students. Once transcribed, I will interpret the qualitative data using the grounded theory approach discussed by Glaser and Strauss (2006) which includes coding the interviews through similarities that emerge and coming up with conclusions based on patterns visible in the interviews. While coding I plan to look for challenges faced by the students and supportive factors throughout their education in order to look for similarities across participants. Over the course of my coding, I will write reflective memos as a way to document both my experiences and observations.

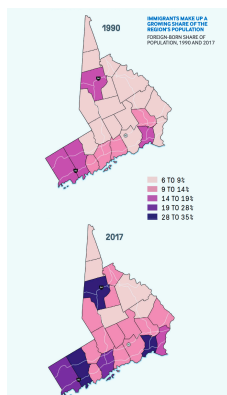


Figure 1a: Fairfield County has experienced an increase in the immigrant population (Datahaven and Fairfield County Community Foundation).

FAIRFIELD COUNTY HAS A WAGE GAP BY BOTH GENDER AND RACE
MEDIAN INCOME OF FULL-TIME ADULT WORKERS, 2016

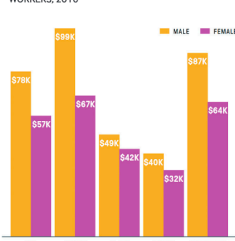


Figure 1b: White men in Fairfield County were the highest earners at \$99,000 and Latina women were the lowest earners at \$32,000 (Datahaven and Fairfield County Community Foundation).

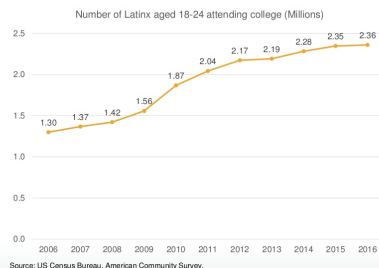


Figure 2: In one decade, enrollment for Latinx students in college increased 82% (Treschan and Lew).

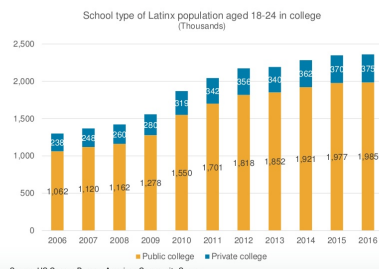


Figure 3: The majority of Latinx college students attend public universities (Treschan and Lew).

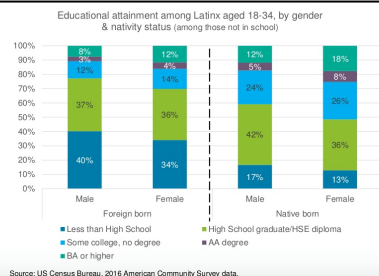


Figure 4: College non-completion is an issue for Latinx students, with the highest rates for US-born Latinas (Treschan and Lew).

Literature Review

Students of color, especially low-income students, who live in Fairfield County face inequality early on in their public education. Segregation continues to be a major issue, as seen with the total number of the county's white students being 53%, yet the six wealthiest districts in Fairfield county are 82% white (Datahaven and Fairfield County Community Foundation). Fairfield County has experienced demographic changes on recent years, including a 22% increase in the immigrant population (Figure 1a), the highest percentage (35%) being in the city of Stamford (Datahaven and Fairfield County Community Foundation). Economic inequality (Figure 1b) and educational inequality remain high.

There is little evidence about the role of student motivations and social support of ethnic minority first-generation students on their college outcomes; instead, success becomes possible through a combination of mental ability, academic skills, personal motivations often tied to cultural values, goals, and environments where students live and study (Dennis et al 2005). Students who come from cultures with collectivist orientations have motivations aligned with meeting the demands of others, such as family, while students with individualistic orientations are likely to be motivated for their own personal reasons, such as sincere interest in a field, intellectual curiosity, and working towards a satisfying career (Dennis et al 2005).

Compared to other groups, Latinx young adults have the lowest high school graduation rates. In 2000, 63% of Latinx adults aged 25-29 graduated high school compared to 87% of African Americans and 94% of whites (Reyes and Nora 2012). Even among the Latinx population, factors such as immigration play a role in graduation rates. This is seen with a lower rate (56%) among foreign born Latinx aged 16-24 who graduated high school compared with 80% of second-generation and 84% of third-generation Latinx immigrants (Reyes and Nora 2012). 37% of Latinx high school graduates aged 18-24 enroll in college, compared to 40% of Black and 49% of white high school graduates (Reyes and Nora 2012).

The social networks of students both prior to and during their undergraduate education are often a large influence for students in their college decisions. In one qualitative study of mostly first-generation Latinx high schoolers, researchers found that these students "came heavily to rely on siblings, peers, relatives, and high school contacts when it came to making their college plans" (Reyes and Amaury 2012, 8). In another study of first-generation Latinx college students, researchers noted different ways students used support networks to navigate college. While some forged new relationships and networks they relied on, others "relied extensively on old networks and resources" and both types of students were more academically successful than those who neither maintained old networks or forged new ones (Reyes and Amaury 2012, 25).

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