Barriers of Access to Four-Year Colleges for Latinos in the United States

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Abstract

This paper examines and seeks to address the unique cluster of disadvantages that impair access to four-year colleges for Latino students in the United States. Latinos constitute the nation’s fastest-growing minority group and face pervasive poverty, which is created and maintained in part by low educational attainment. I have identified and explained six key barriers to Latino educational attainment: Language barriers, parental educational attainment, stigma, legal status, parental working conditions, and cost. I conclude by explaining the value of introducing bilingual education programs and increasing support for parents in reducing the prevalence and impact of these barriers, thus improving educational outcomes for Latino students.

Key words: Latino, Hispanic, college access, educational attainment, poverty, capability, DACA, DREAM Act, language barriers, bilingual education, unemployment, upward mobility
I. Introduction

Fausto immigrated to the United States at the age of ten, arriving in April 2004. At his former school in Honduras, he had been considered an advanced student and took classes with students two years older than him. However, he immediately found himself struggling in his new elementary school. Upon enrollment as a fifth grader, he completed a test written entirely in English to assess his language ability, but because could not speak a word of English, he filled in bubbles on his answer sheet at random. Despite having demonstrated his lack of prior exposure to English, Fausto spent the majority of his time at school immersed in a regular classroom, leaving for two hours a day to receive English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction. His regular teacher spoke no Spanish, and the class contained only two other Spanish-speaking students, whom Fausto frequently asked to translate things said by his teacher and classmates. Eventually, however, the students seemed to grow frustrated with translating for another student in addition to completing their own schoolwork, and Fausto was left to fend for himself in order to keep up with class material.

Latinos constitute a large and rapidly growing segment of the United States population. In 2013, 17 percent of people living in the United States considered themselves Hispanic or Latino. By 2060, the US Census Bureau predicts that this proportion will rise to 31 percent (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Members of this demographic group face disproportionate and pervasive poverty, with 24 percent living below the federal poverty measure, compared with 15 percent of the general population (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013). In 37 states, Latinos experience a poverty rate above 20 percent (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Furthermore, nine percent of Latinos live in deep poverty, defined as an income below 50
percent of the federal poverty measure, compared with six percent of the total population (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014). Due to the Latino population’s large size and high poverty rate, a 2010 study predicted that, by 2030, 44 percent of poor children in the United States will be Latino, compared with one-third today (Ross, Rouse, & Bratton, 2010).

Low educational attainment serves as a major driving force in the persistence of poverty among Latinos. Due to a unique cluster of disadvantages, members of this group earn four-year college degrees at a low rate, making it excessively challenging to achieve upward economic mobility and, thus, to break the cycle of poverty. Four-year colleges are an effective mechanism in avoiding individual and intergenerational poverty. In 2013, graduates of four-year colleges between the ages of 25 and 32 earned, on average, $17,500 more than members of the same age group who had only graduated from high school (Taylor, Fry, & Oates, 2014). Of individuals born in the bottom income quintile, college graduates have a 53 percent chance of rising to at least the middle quintile in adulthood, in comparison to 28 percent of non-college graduates (Per Charitable Trusts, 2014). Furthermore, four-year college graduates have a heightened ability to assist their children in succeeding in school due to increased access to financial and educational resources. A longitudinal study that concluded in 2000 found that parental education level when children were eight years old served as a significant predictor in the children’s educational and occupational success 40 years later (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009).

Increasing Latino educational attainment in the United States would improve the quality of individual lives by promoting capability and bolster the nation’s economy by increasing human capital. Therefore, focused investment of time, energy, and monetary resources in Latino educational attainment is practical for ethical and empirical reasons. Six primary barriers limit this group’s educational attainment: Language barriers, parental educational attainment, stigma,
legal status, parental working conditions, and cost. The current low rates of Latino educational attainment constitute a multifaceted problem that has no blanket solution and, thus, can and should be addressed in several manners. However, introducing bilingual education in public schools and increasing the support provided to Latino parents would have a significant positive impact on Latino educational outcomes.
II. Current Trends in Latino Educational Attainment

a. Data Overview

Latino students are dramatically underrepresented in the realm of postsecondary education in the United States. Members of this group represent 22 percent of kindergarten through twelfth grade students in the nation’s public school systems but only 12 percent of public postsecondary students (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010). Furthermore, while 28 percent of adults possess a four-year college degree, only 13 percent of Latino adults do (Ogunwole, Drewery, & Rios-Vargas, 2012). This disparity in attainment does not begin with postsecondary education; Latino students drop out of high school at a higher rate than any other racial group. In 2013, 14 percent of Latino students dropped out of school before completing the twelfth grade, with Black students and White students doing so at rates of eight percent and five percent, respectively (Fry, 2014).

Despite these low attainment rates, Latino students and their families value education highly. In one study of the Chicago Public Schools system, Latino high school students nearly unanimously reported aspirations of completing at least a four-year college degree, but only 30 percent of Latino students in the sample enrolled in a four-year college in the fall following graduation (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Additionally, a 2004 report by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation indicated that 95 percent of Latino parents considered it “very important” for their children to attend college. Another report found that 87 percent of Latinos view college as “extremely or very important” (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012). Because the majority of Latinos in the United States consider education to
be important, the group’s low attainment rate does not appear to be driven by the apathy of Latino students or parents.

**b. Relevant Legislation: DREAM Act and DACA**

The bipartisan Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM Act) has been reintroduced several times since its initial proposal in 2001 but has failed to pass at a federal level (Crone, 2015). If passed, the DREAM Act would allow undocumented high school graduates and GRE recipients to receive conditional lawful permanent resident status (LPR) for six years provided they have lived in the United States for at least five years and were younger than 16 years old when they first entered the country. During this six-year period, qualified individuals would be permitted to work, attend school, or join the military. If, during this period, an individual completed two years of a bachelor’s or higher degree or served for two years during the military, he or she could receive LPR without conditional status. Some state governments have passed similar acts, some also titled DREAM Acts, to allow for increased opportunities for undocumented students.

In 2012, President Barack Obama’s administration created an initiative called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Like the DREAM Act, this policy allows for the delaying of deportation of young, undocumented immigrants who meet certain criteria regarding their age, education, and criminal record. Essentially, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) temporarily regards individuals who qualify for deferred action as low priorities for immigration enforcement and thus does not deport them. However, deferred action implies neither amnesty nor immunity. An individual who is granted DACA status may be deported after a two-year period if his or her status is not renewed, and the initiative does not include a path to

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1 Unless otherwise stated, all information presented in this subsection comes from the American Immigration Council (2013).
citizenship. While an individual falls under DACA criteria, he or she may legally remain in the United States and attend school.

c. Legislation and Capability

Although DACA increases legal opportunities for some Latinos to pursue a college education, it does not ensure this capability for undocumented immigrants and does nothing to boost capability for citizens and permanent residents. According to Hooker, McHugh, and Mathay (2015), changes in college enrollment since the advent of DACA have varied significantly from state to state due to differing policies on admissions and financial aid. In states, such as California and Illinois, that allow certain DACA grantees to be eligible for in-state tuition to public universities and state financial aid, enrollment of undocumented immigrants in four-year colleges has seen fairly significant increases. However, even students in these states report experiencing challenges with affording college. Furthermore, the educators and administrators interviewed for the report consistently described the unauthorized college students with whom they worked as “highly motivated, resourceful, and talented.” Undocumented Latino students who ultimately enroll in and graduate from four-year colleges may experience constitutional or environmental factors other than financial circumstances that make them more resilient than their undocumented Latino peers who do not enter in postsecondary institutions.
III. Barriers to Attainment

a. Language Barriers

Language barriers severely limit many Latino students’ ability to succeed academically in the United States. Because a large proportion of Latino children come from immigrant families, with 58 percent living with one or more immigrant parent (Foxen, 2010), many receive little or no English exposure outside of school settings. A 2007 Pew Research Institute report by Hakimzadeh and Cohn indicated that less than one fourth of adult first-generation Latino immigrants are fluent in English, and although fluency increases dramatically across generations, second- and third-generation immigrants do not unanimously achieve fluency, speaking English at rates of 88 and 94 percent, respectively. Thus, although the majority of second and third generation Latinos speaks English fluently, there remains a large number of Latinos in the United States who have not achieved fluency in English. According to the same report, 52 percent of Latinos in the United States report that they speak exclusively Spanish at home. Thus, many Latino students rely on their schools to provide them with the ability to read, write, and speak English at a level comparable with their peers. If their schools fail to provide adequate English instruction, students will inevitably suffer academically.

Limited English proficiency creates excessive difficulties in educational success. Students who lack a mastery of English quickly fall behind their classmates due to difficulty understanding the material being discussed. By the time these students grasp the material, the rest of the class has moved on to a new topic, leaving struggling students perpetually behind. Experts have debated heavily in recent decades regarding whether policies should focus primarily on making more resources available in Spanish or helping Spanish-speakers assimilate
to American society by learning English.\(^2\) Regardless of one’s views of assimilation, however, it is apparent that many schools do not, at the present, provide sufficient language support to Latinos. Less than three percent of the nation’s teachers of English language learners have completed formal certification to work with this population, and only 27 percent believe that they are sufficiently prepared to teach them (American Federation of Teachers, 2004). Additionally, by eighth grade, fifteen percent of Latino students have achieved proficiency in English reading, while 39 percent of White students have (Gándara, 2006).

**b. Parental Educational Attainment**

Because Latinos as a group fail to achieve high levels of education, it logically follows that few Latino students have well-educated parents. Indeed, a 2006 study reported that only fifteen percent of Latino students in kindergarten through twelfth grade had parents who had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (Santiago, 2008). This finding holds particularly true for children of Latino immigrants. According to Portés and Rumbaut (2014), in 2010, 28 percent of immigrants to the United States over the age of 25 had completed college, a similar proportion to that of the country’s total population. However, among immigrants from Latino countries, fewer than ten percent have done so. Furthermore, immigrants from the countries of Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico have a college graduation rate less than half of that in the general immigrant population.

As discussed in Section IA of this paper, parental educational attainment is significantly linked to children’s educational outcomes. Well-educated parents have a stronger understanding than their peers of the skills needed to achieve academic success, allowing them to better support

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\(^2\) See Young (Chapter 6) for an overview on this debate.
their children in school. Additionally, parents with higher levels of education tend to have higher expectations for their children’s educational attainment, which makes them more likely to engage in behaviors with their children – such as reading, playing, and exhibiting warmth – that promote social and intellectual growth (Davis-Kean, 2005).

c. Stigma

The media perpetuates a consistently negative stereotype of Latinos through unfavorable portrayals and underrepresentation, both of which can cause minority groups to be perceived in an adverse manner (Sizemore & Milner, 2004). In a 2004 content analysis of articles about Latino immigration in major newspapers in the Southwest, a region heavily populated by Latinos, only 10 percent of the articles focused on positive aspects of Latino immigration. The remaining articles portrayed Latino immigration in a negative light. Of these, half focused on undocumented immigration and the perceived flaws of Border Patrol. Additionally, one-third of the negative articles referred to undocumented Latino immigrants as “illegal immigrants” or “illegal aliens” (Steinberg, 2004). This negative representation of Latinos occurs in academic writing as well. A content analysis of recent editions of introductory United States government and politics textbooks utilized in undergraduate classes revealed that the texts contained little information about Latinos, and the brief information that the texts provided was largely limited to the contexts of civil rights and immigration (Monforti & McGlynn, 2010).

Sizemore and Milner (2004) demonstrated that, rather than drawing attention to the problematic nature of racial stigma, negative media portrayals promote the denial of discrimination against Latinos, perhaps by creating a justification for mistreatment of the group. Negative stereotypes of demographic groups can lead to impaired academic performance through
a variety of mechanisms, including self-fulfilling prophecies from teachers, stereotype threat, and impaired self-esteem.

d. Legal Status

Latinos constitute a significant portion of the United States’ immigrant population, with 46 percent of the nation’s immigrants reported to be of Hispanic origin (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Many Latino immigrants in the United States face barriers to educational attainment due to undocumented status. It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the prevalence undocumented immigrants, but according to a 2012 estimate, 11.2 million undocumented immigrants currently reside in the United States. Roughly half of undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States hail from Mexico alone, with growing numbers emigrating from additional Latin American countries (Krogstad & Passel, 2014). Although DACA and state legislation have increased the accessibility of four-year colleges for undocumented Latino immigrants, members of this group continue to enroll in college at low rates due to continued legal, financial, and practical restrictions.

e. Parental Working Conditions

Latinos in the United States have a somewhat higher unemployment rate than the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). Parental unemployment has been linked with familial instability and impairments in children’s wellbeing (Lindner & Peters, 2014), which may hinder academic performance.

The working conditions of employed parents can also have a negative effect on Latino children. Due to legal regulations, undocumented immigrants face barriers to gaining and
maintaining quality employment and often must resort to under-the-counter jobs with poor work conditions. Because these jobs tend to target the most “desperate” employees, their workers may work unreasonable hours for below minimum wage. The agricultural industry in particular has exhibited a marked tendency to mistreat undocumented workers through verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and grueling labor conditions (Greenhouse, 2014). Latino citizens and legal immigrants to the United States also struggle with quality employment due to their low educational attainment. Many documented and undocumented Latino workers do not receive health insurance from their employers, and employees who lack proficiency in English are particularly likely to go without employer-sponsored insurance (Reschovsky, Hadley, & Nichols, 2007). The long and inconsistent hours, high stress, and insufficient compensation received by many Latino workers make it difficult for them to provide adequate and consistent financial, educational, and emotional support for their children.

f. Cost

According to a 2014 report by the National Student Clearinghouse, high school level of poverty is the most significant predictor of college enrollment. Furthermore, a 2015 study found that low-income, high-achieving students often do not apply to certain colleges due to an incorrect belief that they will not receive sufficient financial aid (Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Because Latino students are more likely than their peers to experience poverty, these findings offer a direct explanation for their low achievement rates. Undocumented immigrants, in particular, face challenges to affording college due to differing state policies on financial aid (Hooker, McHugh, & Mathay, 2015).
g. A Unique Cluster of Disadvantages

The individual disadvantages discussed in this section are, of course, not experienced exclusively by Latinos. However, the combination of aversive factors surrounding Latino college attainment is unique. Poor White Americans, for example, may face educational disadvantages due to low parental education rates and harsh parental working conditions, but they do not in general suffer from racial stigma or language barriers. Children of immigrants from Asia may have high rates of poverty, but they are more likely than children of Latino immigrants to have well-educated parents and less likely to be undocumented immigrants. As a whole, Latinos in the United States experience a cluster of educational disadvantages unlike that of any other demographic group, allowing for the persistent replication of poverty.
IV. Recommendations

a. Primary Recommendations

Because the issue of Latino educational attainment is multifaceted, there is no singular solution. To fully address the problem, efforts must be made to reduce the prevalence or impact of each of the major disadvantages faced by Latino students. However, introducing bilingual education programs in public school systems and increasing the support available to Latino parents would serve as effective starting points in improving Latino enrollment in and completion of four-year colleges.

i. Bilingual Education Programs

Public school systems in the United States address English language learners in a variety of manners, ranging from full English immersion to instruction in only the primary language. According to Goldberg (2008), five independent meta-analyses of education research have unanimously indicated that bilingual education promotes academic achievement. Studies consistently indicate that non-English speaking Latino students experience better educational outcomes when receiving instruction in Spanish. Although this finding can seem counterintuitive, knowledge, concepts, and skills such as literacy can transfer into other languages. In other words, if a Spanish-speaking student learns information in his native language, he will be able to either retain this knowledge or quickly re-acquire it in English. When non-English speaking students are taught math and science in English, they have a difficult time understanding and retaining material until their English skills undergo substantial improvement, a process that can take months or years. Bilingual education allows students to
continue to develop reading and math skills while learning English, making them more able to perform at the same level as their peers after transitioning to English-only education.

Bilingual education does not confer solely intellectual benefits. According to Langenkamp (2005), bilingual education results in “benefits such as increases in cognitive ability, achievement, and self-esteem.” Furthermore, Langenkamp argues that bilingual education programs improve Latino students’ ability to integrate into United States education system and society by bridging cultural barriers. Thus, introducing bilingual education programs in more public school systems – and improving such programs where they do exist – could address Latino disadvantages other than language barriers. Increased integration of Latino students into their school communities could reduce prejudice and discrimination by classmates and educators by decreasing negative stigmas of Latinos.

### ii. Increased Support for Latino Parents

As mentioned in Section IIA, Latino families place a high value on educational attainment; the disparity between Latino values and achievement stems from often-uncontrollable circumstances, not from lack of parental interest. Because few Latino parents have college degrees themselves, they have little knowledge of how to support and guide their children in their pursuit of higher education. Furthermore, when balancing stressful, low wage jobs with the responsibilities of raising children, many of these parents may struggle to begin the daunting process of college research. This holds true especially for non-English speaking parents, who have little access to information they can understand about colleges in the United States.
Universities and public school systems could facilitate Latino parental involvement in the college application and enrollment processes simply by making pertinent information more accessible. Public school systems catering to children of immigrants should make concerted efforts to ensure that parents understand how to support children in their academic endeavors. This could entail group information sessions taught in Spanish, individual counseling sessions, or simply arranging for a Spanish-speaker to be present to translate at parent-teacher conferences. Four-year colleges could support this effort by publishing brochures and other information in Spanish and by increasing outreach to Latino families.

b. General Recommendations

Reducing any of the major negative factors experienced by Latino students would likely have a positive impact on the group’s educational attainment. Of course, the barriers that Latino students experience do not function individually, instead forming a unique cluster of disadvantages. Therefore, efforts to improve Latino educational attainment should consider each barrier in relation to the others and strive to target as many of them as possible in an efficient manner. There are multiple possible solutions to each disadvantage discussed in this paper, each with varying degrees of political, financial, and practical complexity. I will not attempt to elaborate upon or prioritize these solutions but will instead present them as options to be considered in future research and interventions.

Improving or creating cultural sensitivity training programs in public schools would likely be an effective mechanism for reducing language barriers and stigma from students as well as teachers. Additionally, effortful recruiting of Spanish-speaking employees in public schools may lead to decreases in prejudice and discrimination and allow for more effective teaching of
English language learners. The particular disadvantages of undocumented Latino students could be reduced through enacting a policy such as the DREAM Act at a federal level and by modifying individual states’ admissions and financial aid policies to better accommodate undocumented applicants. Reducing the barriers to legal immigration may also help address this problem by decreasing the number of undocumented Latino students in the country. As for the disadvantages associated with parental income, raising minimum wage and heightening enforcement of labor laws would result in lowered rates of poverty and stress for Latino families, allowing parents to focus more on their children’s academic progress.
V. Conclusion

Fausto spent the summer after fifth grade at an ESOL summer program, where he experienced significant growth in his English abilities. He graduated from the ESOL program at his school a few months later, while many of his peers remained in the program for several years. In May 2012, he enrolled in an elite university as the recipient of a full merit scholarship. Despite possessing natural intelligence and drive, he attributes a large part of his success to exceptional circumstances. When asked for his thoughts about why so many Latino students do not attain high levels of education, he responded, “I think I used to play into that role of blaming my Hispanic counterparts and saying, ‘They’re not trying hard enough; they’re not trying as hard as I am,’ without considering the different opportunities I had access to that they did not. I had a stable home. I could come home and do homework and do it in a peaceful environment. I wasn’t the wealthiest – I lived in a small place – but I still had a place where I could [focus] without anyone bothering me.” Additionally, Fausto’s mother, a working class immigrant with limited proficiency in English, encouraged him to establish a better life for himself than she had. He expressed a deep appreciation of his mother for instilling work ethic in him and teaching him the importance of “the idea of delivering results, being responsible, [and] being on time.”

Fausto could not have arrived where he is today without natural talent and hard work, but he also may not have done so had he not adjusted well to his ESOL program, lived in a stable home, or had a mother who encouraged him to strive for success. Although no one is guaranteed a four-year college education in the United States, every student deserves the opportunity to attain one. Latino students face a unique set of disadvantages that render college access excessively difficult. Therefore, in order to eliminate disparities in capability, governments, school systems, and universities must work to reduce barriers to Latino educational attainment.
References


