

LATINA/O FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND COLLEGE  
ADJUSTMENT: AN EXAMINATION OF FAMILY SUPPORT PROCESSES

by

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LATINA/O FIRST GENERATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS AND COLLEGE  
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University of Nebraska, 2015

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First generation Latina/o college students are at a higher risk for not completing their college degrees when compared to other ethnic minorities due to added barriers and challenges of being the first to go to college. Researchers reported that poor college adjustment is one of the factors contributing to the lack of college completion among Latina/o college students. A few studies exist on the role that family support has on the college adjustment of Latina/o students and these yielded mixed findings. The central role of the family among Latina/o students and their support during the college adjustment period merits attention. Consequently, a qualitative multiple case study is ideal for exploring what family support consists of and the role it has on the transition and college adjustment of Latina/o first generation college students. Furthermore, the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of family support and their influence on college adjustment were examined within the psychosociocultural framework.

College students and their parents were interviewed separately. The students participated in two interviews. The information of the first interview was used to construct a family genogram. The second set of student interviews and the parent interviews focused on family support. The data of the second student interview and the

parent dyad were analyzed case by case, resulting in five to six themes for each family. A cross-case analysis was followed, resulting in six themes across all cases. These themes included: (a) cultural values and *consejos* in higher education; (b) types of support received in higher education; (c) finding my place in college, soy Latina/o; (d) the emotional journey of transition to college; (e) college adjustment strategies; and (f) challenges encountered in college. These themes represent salient issues that four Latina/o first generation college students and their parents experienced during the transition and subsequent period of adjustment to college, while highlighting the role that family support had during this process. Implications for research and practice are also discussed.

## Dedication

For my parents who came to this country in search of a better future and always encouraged me to pursue a career and go to college. Thank you for all your support throughout the years. To my husband and son, thank you for the love and support you give me each and every day. This is for you!

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The transition from high school to college is a major milestone in the lives of many young adults and their families. However, when the student belongs to an ethnic minority group, and is the first in his or her family to attend college, this transition brings with it a set of barriers or deterrent factors that are worth examining. Researchers have found that the culture of the family along with financial concerns, as well as social and interpersonal factors (Solorzano, 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000) can affect degree attainment for first-generation Latino college students (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Nora, 1987). Furthermore, the relative lack of significant numbers of individuals from one's own culture attending colleges and universities provides an additional barrier to postsecondary attendance. Without role models, it is often difficult to envision this path as one that is truly available to the Latina/o high school student. The literature also points to college transition and adjustment as vital to one's retention in and completion of college. In fact, higher education researchers have been clear in concluding that successful adjustment to college (including academic, social and personal-emotional adjustment) is a good predictor of student graduation (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Mallinckrodt, 1988) and negatively related to attrition rates (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). While the culture of the family can be both an asset and a deficit when it comes to college attendance and subsequent success, it has been found that maintaining family relationships is one factor that contributes to facilitating college adjustment for Latino full time students (Hurtado et al., 1996).

For the Latino culture, the family unit holds great importance throughout one's life. Consequently, it can be hypothesized that family is likely to play an important role in a college student's life, even when the college student is no longer living at home. Going to college for many Latinos involves a separation from home and family, and successfully dealing with this separation may be one of the hurdles needed to surmount to facilitate adjustment to college. Some researchers have found that family can be helpful in student retention if the family is familiar with the college environment and can develop relationships with college administrators and faculty (Hernandez, 2000). This type of family support, however, may be largely unavailable for those students who are the first in their families to attend college. A recent study that focused on first-generation college students reported that, while parents and other family members could not provide the student with information and resources regarding college attainment and persistence, the maintenance of family relationships was nevertheless critical for these first-generation college students in their pursuit of a college degree (Saunders & Serna, 2004). These researchers also reported that family serves as a source of strength and comfort for many first-generation college students. At the same time, some of these students struggle balancing family issues with the demands of being a full-time college student (Saunders & Serna, 2004). It appears, then, that family can be a double-edged sword for some Latino college students who struggle with balancing academic responsibilities and the maintenance of family relationships.

While parents of first-generation college students may have a positive attitude about education, their unfamiliarity with the educational system in the United States may

be a major factor in limiting their ability to help their children navigate the road to college (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004). Furthermore, it is very likely that these same parents may not understand the differences between attending community college/trade school versus a 4-year institution. Families with strong traditional values and rigid gender roles may have a difficult time allowing their daughter to move away from home to attend college. Findings from a qualitative study on first-generation Latina students reported that families questioned their daughter's decisions to leave home to attend college; the daughters were accused of abandoning the family; and loyalty to the family was questioned (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). It is possible that for some Latinas, not having their family support to move away will not only limit the opportunities for Latinas to attend a university of their choice, but it also deprives them of what is often viewed as an essential aspect of the college experience, campus life. Latino sons, on the other hand, may be at greater liberty to move away from home for college, but may choose not to live too far from home, especially if there are younger siblings. Additionally, Latino males may have a stronger need to contribute financially to their family upon college graduation in order to fulfill the cultural and gender role as a provider (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The need to contribute to the family through work for immigrant Latinos may "supersede their desire to attain a higher education" (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009, p. 76). It is therefore likely that some of the young male Latino college graduates will choose to begin their career in order to help out their families financially instead of pursuing graduate school.

In order to gain a better understanding of what first generation Latina/o college students experience as they adjust to college and the role that their families play in this process, a multiple case qualitative study was used as it is ideal to shed light on this critical topic. The Latino population is quite disadvantaged when it comes to educational attainment at all levels, from high school to college and beyond. Many factors come together to exacerbate the lack of educational attainment among this population in the United States.

The most recent U.S. census data indicate that Latinos currently constitute the largest minority group in the United States (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). Their population has reached more than 50 million and they currently comprise 16.3% of the U.S. population. Future projections of this population indicate that, by the year 2050, 1 out of 4 individuals in the United States will be Latina/o. This rapid increase in population growth has serious implications for colleges and universities that are already struggling to deal with this change in demographics. Not surprisingly, both currently and in the coming decades, colleges and universities must take the necessary steps to deal with the needs of this population. Before continuing, however, it will be important to explore who makes up this population of Latinas/os.

The terms Hispanics and Latinas/os are often used interchangeably in multicultural literature (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). According to Santiago-Rivera et al. (2002), the term Hispanic first appeared in 1978 when Office of Management and Budget created it as part of a federal order whose purpose was to “categorize a group of people not by specific country of origin with

unique history, religion indigenous roots, cultural traditions and foods but rather by a common language, namely Spanish” (p. 21). The term is problematic and not accepted by those individuals who find it to be misleading (i.e., leading others to believe that they have one common culture or racial category), offensive and of no personal significance (Santigao-Rivera et al., 2002). Still, it is possible to find groups of individuals that prefer the term Hispanic over Latina/o. A general guideline holds that, whenever possible, one should defer to the individuals being addressed or referred to, and allow them to choose the term they prefer. In so doing, one empowers them and gives them a voice, rather than merely imposing a label. According to Falicov (1998) the term Latina/o is preferred “because it reaffirms their native, pre-Hispanic identity” (p. 34). Furthermore the term Latina/o is geographically more accurate, referring to individuals from Latin America (taking into account those individuals who are of Indigenous ancestry) and not from Spain (Falicov, 1998). Needless to say, the discourse on appropriate labels for this population is ongoing and researchers will choose what they believe is best in their studies. Because of personal preference, throughout this paper I have chosen to use the term Latina/o when discussing this population, consistent with many other researchers in this field.

Despite the broadly inclusive label, it is important to understand that Latinas/os are by no means a homogenous group. There is substantial within-group variability among this population. The term Latina/o is very complex and includes groups of people whose nationalities extend from countries that include Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and South and Central America (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004).

More generally it includes all persons in the United States who self-identify as Hispanic or Latina/o (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). Hispanic and Latinas/os are racially diverse, although predominantly white or mestizo. It is important to note that mestizo is not a race, but it is a person who has both White and American Indian ancestry. As a result of their racial diversity, Hispanics form an ethnicity, sharing a language and cultural heritage, rather than a race. American Hispanics are predominantly of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Salvadorian, and Cuban ancestry (Grieco & Cassidy, 2001). Consequently, given all of this variability among the Latina/o population, researchers must caution themselves not to assume that their findings with a subset of Latinas/os generalize to the whole group.

Adding to the variability among Latinas/os is their immigration history. Depending upon their country of origin, and their political and economic situations, Latinas/os migrate to the United States for many different reasons. Among these are a desire to escape political change, or to pursue better economic opportunities and better educational opportunities (Falicov, 1998). The migration of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans can best be understood as a result of seeking better economic opportunities (Falicov, 1998). In the case of Cubans, however, migration, for the most part, is the result of fleeing political turmoil in their home country and seeking refuge in the United States (Falicov, 1998). Finally, many migrants from Central and South America enter the United States for both economic and political reasons. The various reasons for entry into the United States have important implications for the positions these individuals hold in

the labor force and, indirectly, influence on the number and manner of Latinas/os seeking higher education.

Not only do Latinas/os differ in their country of origin, they also vary with respect to their socioeconomic status and educational attainment once in the United States. For example, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans appear to be the most disadvantaged as it relates to socioeconomic status. According to the U.S. Census Hispanic Population Report (Ramirez, 2000), Puerto Ricans followed by Mexicans had the highest percentage of families living below the poverty line where Puerto Ricans accounted for 26.7% and Mexicans accounted for 24.4% of families living below poverty in the U.S. Cubans, on the other hand, had the lowest level of families in poverty (11%). In regards to educational attainment, the U.S. Census report on Hispanic populations (Ramirez, 2000) indicates that Mexicans have the lowest educational attainment among Latinas/os, where only 49.7% have a high school diploma and 7.1% have a bachelors degree or higher. In contrast, Central and South Americans (18%), as well as Cubans (24.8%) have the highest proportion with a bachelors degree or higher (Ramirez, 2000).

The fact that, overall, Latinas/os have low educational attainment in high school and college when compared to other ethnic minorities has serious implications for the types of jobs and careers that are accessible to them. As a result, it is not surprising that researchers have found an underrepresentation of Latinos in higher education and an overrepresentation of them in low-paying, unskilled labor. This point is highlighted in Liu and Rodriguez's (2004) research indicating that most Latinas/os entering the workforce find unskilled occupations. Additionally the U.S. Department of Labor (2003)

reported that Latinas/os are underrepresented in both management and professional occupations.

As the largest ethnic minority group with the fastest population growth, Latinas/os already make up a large portion of the labor force in the United States, and this will only grow. Having an educated labor force is essential if the United States hopes to continue competing economically with other powerful nations. The lack of Latina/o educational attainment will negatively impact the upward mobility of Latinos, as well as limit the political power necessary to effect change in their communities (Gloria, 1998).

Recent statistics on the lack of educational attainment of Latinas/os is alarming. Not only do Latinas/os have high dropout rates in high school, they are also less likely to complete a GED compared to other groups. Lack of educational attainment is also visible at the college level, where only a small percentage will complete a bachelor's degree.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, recent census data regarding Latinas/os' college enrollment and trends indicate that Latina/o college students tend to be older than traditional college students and are also more likely to enroll in community colleges rather than four year institutions. Similarly, the completion of GED's among Latinas/os is also comparatively low. One in ten Latinas/os who drop out will obtain a GED compared to two in ten Black high school dropouts and three in ten White high school dropouts. (Fry, 2010). Completion of a high school degree or GED differed based upon whether Latinas/os were foreign born or native born. Fifty-two percent (52%) of foreign born Latinas/os were high school dropouts compared to 25% of native born Latinos. This educational trend holds true for the completion of GED's, where 5% of foreign born