

LATINO/A STUDENTS MANEUVERING THROUGH THE COLLEGE
ADMISSIONS AND RETENTION SYSTEMS

by

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This dissertation uses Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o critical Theory (LatCrit) and Standpoint approaches to provide an in depth description of the experiences of Latino/a students as they maneuver through the admissions and retention systems into a four-year institution in Nebraska. This dissertation examines how students balance forms of capital to challenge racialized structures and oppressive systems. From their multiple standpoints, these students successfully navigated their marginalized status as Latino/a, immigrant, and even as undocumented. I argue that assuming that our college students and their families are monolingual and monocultural is as detrimental to them as it is to higher education. Institutions of higher education can validate existing and diverse forms of capital by intentionally including Spanish speaking families, and engaging them early in conversations about how to fund college. Support systems in schools that challenge the stigma associated with undocumented status ought to be identified and propagated.

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The College Choice Process: An Instrument to Perpetuate Inequality

The link between schooling and social inequality has been established by stratification literature for decades (Collins, 1971; Oakes, 1985; Massey & Denton, 1993; Roscigno, 1999; Karabel, 2005; Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006). For Latino/as, whether new immigrants or those with families geographically within the United States for generations, the pathway to completing high school and moving on to college has been a journey with conflicts, barriers and uneven success rates.

Educational stratification and unequal school outcomes are influenced not only by individual skills and human capital, but by schooling practices themselves. Critical race theorists highlight the role of Pre K-12 schools in reproducing inequalities for marginalized groups throughout the educational process (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In high schools, and even middle schools, school tracking and testing processes offer differentiated opportunities to students as they are sorted into different courses that may or may not prepare them for college (Oakes 1985). This sorting disproportionately benefits students at higher tracks and disadvantages students at lower tracks. Nationally, Latino students are routinely underrepresented in college preparatory and honors high school programs that are crucial to launching successful college careers (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Tracking decisions within schools separate students based on preconceptions of race, ethnicity and social class, early on and then perpetuate unequal access to college-bound curricula, as well as to higher education.

For many, especially first generation and minority college students, the goal of accessing higher education is to provide those credentials that assist economic mobility

(Espinoza et al. 2011). Credentialism within the United States increasingly emphasizes the linkage between school successes and economic mobility (Collins, 1971). Employers and policy makers point to unequal educational outcomes to legitimize unequal resources and the meritocratic placement of people in the occupational hierarchy. This stratified occupational hierarchy disproportionately benefits outcomes for the dominant group that controls educational processes and outcomes. Ongoing credential inflation resets the minimum bar for economic mobility even when jobs do not require advanced skills. Those who set the testing standards (even for high school graduation) and determine college admissions processes gain substantial advantages (Collins, 1979). Thus, education is recognized as a key meeting place for the construction and perpetuation of racism, social class relations, and gender inequalities (Collins, 1971, Ladson- Billings & Tate 1995). These dynamics of social, racial and gendered stratification are facilitated by limiting access to higher education to certain groups in society, and systematically restrict opportunities for Latino students (Rubin & Noguera 2004, Bergerson, 2009).

School practices of tracking, testing and credential inflation align with the argument made by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) that individuals from distinctive and privileged social locations are socialized differently to maintain patterns of domination and inequality, even within schools (Lareau, 2003). Although our understanding of factors that contribute to the stratification of American education has grown in the past decades (Bergerson, 2009), we still need to understand the differences of race, ethnicity, social class and the college choice process (Hovart, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Perna, 2000). Previous literature has called for research that would enhance our understanding

of how human capital and other resources are used in the college choice process (McDonough, 1997), and to examine the gap between aspirations and enrollment among students of color (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

The college choice process can be an instrument to perpetuate inequality. Differences of race, class and legal status influence how students approach decisions that lead to college enrollment. Given that the college admission process is not intuitive, it can be classified as one these systems of oppression. This dissertation explores how Latino/a students manage the transition from high school to college, especially how they use capital to access and deploy resources that result in college enrollment. The first chapter frames the importance of understanding how Latino/a students, and their educational pathways. First, I present a statement of the problem in light of current demographic changes and educational challenges. Next, I address the purpose of this dissertation and research questions guiding the study. Finally, I conclude with the importance of a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of Latino/a students transitioning into college as well as the theoretical frameworks that guide this study.

Statement of the Problem

Latinos/as are the largest minority group in the U.S. comprising 17.3% of the total population as of 2014. Overall, the Latino/a population is young: the median age is 28 years and about one-third of the Latino/a population is younger than 18. The vast majority of Latino/a children younger than 18 are U.S. born (94%). When looking at U.S. born Latinos/as only, the median age is 19 compared to the median age among foreign born Latinos/as which is 41 (Patten, 2016). Despite their age profile, Latinos/as

enrollment in higher education and completion of four-year degrees lags behind other racial and ethnic groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2015).

In 2010, Latinos/as represented 15% of the overall enrollment in two-year or four-year institutions of higher education. Despite recent growth in the number of young Latinos/as enrolled in college, they are not the largest minority group represented in the nation's four-year colleges. In 2010, 73% of Latino/a 18-24 year-olds completed high school but only 44% of those continued onto higher education (Fry & Lopez, 2012). A total of 42% of Latinos/as that continue onto higher education attend a public two-year school (Pew Hispanic Center, 2015).

Although schools are now more diverse than in previous decades, educational achievement remains highly differentiated by social class, race and gender (Cammarota, 2004, Kao & Thompson, 2003, Rosigno et al 2006). The past three decades have shown positive changes. For example, some of the black-white test gaps have shrunk in both high school math and reading. Also, educational aspirations are high for all racial and ethnic groups, with more students expecting to go to college (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Racial and ethnic achievement differences persist after accounting for parental socioeconomic background and research has shown that human capital qualifications (GPA and test scores) and college aspiration do not necessarily translate into enrollment into or completion of four-year college degree programs (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011, Kao & Thompson, 2003). Aspirations to attend college immediately after high school, as well as educational and occupational trajectories vary by gender (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003).

Literature on college enrollment identifies that the likelihood of enrolling in

college after graduation from high school is related to the resources provided by social networks (Perna & Titus, 2005; Perez & McDonough, 2008). For example, parental involvement can build social capital deemed important to the admissions process. The relationships parents have with other adults related to the high school or even the target university may influence access to knowledge about the admissions process. The size of the social network matters as well as the amounts and types of economic, cultural, and social capital that members of the network possess (Portes, 1998; Perna & Titus, 2005). Latino/a students have been found to possess low levels of resources in part due to the homogeneity of their social networks and their over representation in low income families with lower levels of college experience (Perna & Titus, 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; González et al., 2003).

Latino/a students overall have lower college enrollment rates than both whites and blacks. The college going rate for Latino/a high school completers between 18 and 24 years old was 37%, compared to 40% for Blacks and 49% for whites (Santiago, 2011). According to the National Center of Education Statistics, in 2012, of Latinos/as in college, Latinos/as earned more Associate Degrees than any other group, and Latinos/as earned fewer four year degrees than any other race or ethnicity. Table 1.1 shows Undergraduate degree programs (in percentage of college students) in the United States by race/ethnicity for 2012.

Table 1.1

Undergraduate degree program by Race/ethnicity (with multiple) In 2012

Undergraduate degree program	Certificate	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Not in a degree program or others
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Estimates				
Total	8	42.3	46.4	3.3
Race/ethnicity (with multiple)				
White	7.1	39.6	49.3	3.9
Black or African American	10.8	46.5	41.2	1.5
Hispanic or Latino	9.9	50	37.6	2.6
Asian	4.5	34.8	55.8	4.8
American Indian or Alaska Native	10.9	43.7	42.2	3.2
Native Hawaiian / other Pacific Islander	7.7	49	41.8	1.5
Other	6.1	42.7	48.5	2.7
More than one race	‡	‡	‡	‡

‡ Reporting standards not met.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011-12 National Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study (NPSAS:12).

Computation by NCES QuickStats on 2/17/2016

One assumption of this study is that legal status confounds access to higher education. Both liminally legal and undocumented youth face barriers to higher education because of the stigmatized status (Cebulko 2014). Uncertainty about their legal status shapes how students interact and deploy social capital. Their marginalized status limits their access to financial resources, and adds structural barriers to their college choice process (Rincon, 2008; Enriquez, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively explore how Latino/a students manage the college admissions process and how they translate social and cultural capital to access and deploy resources that result in actual college enrollment. This dissertation also generates in- depth understanding of how students deploy different forms of capital

to stay in college, and how legal status shapes decisions to enroll and stay enrolled in college among Latino/a individuals and communities.

Theory, Methodology and Research Questions

Standpoint epistemology allows for the exploration of how Latino/a students transition from high school to college. Standpoint researchers recognize that all knowledge is socially situated, and that research on power relationships should begin with the marginalized (Collins, 1990; Smith, 2004). Narrative inquiry emphasizes that experience happens both at the individual level and within a social structure (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and that humans structure knowledge into narrative forms (Saldaña, 2011). Theoretical perspectives that guide this study are critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso 2005) and intersectionality theories (Collins, 1990; Roscigno, 2011). The central question for the study and the interview design interrogates how Latino/a students maneuver through the admissions and retentions processes in a Midwest University. For the purpose of this study I define the admissions process as all the preparatory activities including awareness of the process and decisions made prior to enrolling in college. The admissions process includes pre-admissions actions and post admission decision-making until college enrollment.

There are three sub-questions that I am interested in exploring:

1. How do Latino/a students discover and maneuver through the admissions process into 4-year colleges in the Midwest?
2. How do Latino/a students balance forms of capital to enroll in college?
3. How do Latino/a students balance forms of capital to stay enrolled in college?

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study is important for several reasons. Literature on college enrollment focuses on the deficiencies that minority students have for maneuvering through the college admissions process. Literature on Latino/a students navigating educational systems acknowledges the role of diminishing value of existing capital by the schooling systems (Valenzuela, 1999). This qualitative study intends to gain in-depth understanding of how Latino/a students' approach the admissions and how they remain enrolled in college using Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth framework. This study explores the existence of forms of capital that may not be validated by the dominant group, but are activated as resources that aid in managing the admissions process. This study adds new knowledge to the importance of nurturing cultural wealth to increase the number of Latino/a students enrolled in college. The findings of this study may influence recruitment and retention professionals at the college level, as well as high school guidance, career counselors, and college preparatory program personnel.

Overview of the Dissertation

This study serves as a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Chapter one identified significant demographic changes related to Latino/a high school graduates and their limitations in enrolling in four year institutions. Using a qualitative approach provides more in-depth meaning and themes associated with Latino/a college enrollment and retention.

Chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review of current and past research related to Latino/a college enrollment based on class, race and ethnicity, and

legal status. I also explore how Critical Race Theory guides the research and expands theories of educational inequality by race and gender.

Chapter three includes the research methodology for this qualitative study. The research procedures are presented, including data collection of in-depth interviews and data analysis strategies. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures and protection of research participants is described. Given the qualitative basis of my research, I also include a reflexivity passage with personal background, gender, and professional history as these may shape the interpretations formed during the study (Creswell, 2009).

Chapter four and five discuss the major themes and three subthemes. Chapter four focuses on the experiences of Latino/a students including key processes and decisions made individually and with family prior to enrolling in college. Two broad themes are explored: “Because it was in the last moment” addressing the timing of engaging in the admissions process and “It wasn’t my counselor” addressing the social capital used to engage in the admissions process. Chapter five explores the experiences of undocumented students with both the admissions process and the retention structures once they become college students. The other broad theme described in this chapter is “We need more of that support from people like you, that are already in college” which delves into these student respondents’ experiences with mentors once they were in college. Chapter six summarizes and synthesizes my findings within Critical Race Theory. It also includes a discussion of the study’s limitations and future research directions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The meaning of education in our society has been a concern for sociology for many decades. Traditionally, education has been associated with the development of a trained workforce and the creation of good citizens. Education is therefore crucial in the development of human capital, or the productive skills and experiences that people acquire. In this chapter, I review the theories and research on the forms of capital developed by racial/ethnic minority students at home and in school, and the consequences for their movement from high school to college.

According to human capital theories, education is the route to a better life, with a unique economic value that would improve individual life chances and a country's economic development (Brint, 2006). Some sociologists have argued that education requirements change to meet the demands of the changing labor market. A decrease in low skill jobs would then result in a demand for raising education requirements that include training in specific skills (Davis & Moore, 1945).

In contrast, social theorist Randall Collins (1971) argued that the rising education requirements in the United States have resulted in a heightened value of credentialism. Formal education is used to limit mobility opportunities for some, and expand them for others. Groups that dominate the labor market impose their cultural standards in the selection process of prospective job candidates. These processes of control have been successfully used to discriminate based on name, accent, dress, gender and manners (Collins, 1971; Albelda, 1986; Massey & Lundy, 2001).

The social organization of the school that includes tracking, grouping based on ability, and teacher-center classrooms reproduces the social relations found at the

workplace (Oakes, 1985; Lucas, 1999). Working-class and minority students are disproportionately represented in lower-track classrooms, where they are more likely to be assigned repetitive exercises, experience little problem solving or creative activities (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). Through these educational tracking processes, viewed publicly as neutral and unbiased, opportunities for higher education are limited for low-income and minority students. The qualifications and college aspirations of students do not necessarily translate into college enrollment (Roderick et al., 2011).

The unequal structures of schools and students' and family experiences shape their access to higher education (Lareau, 2003). Race/ethnicity, class, and legal status further influence students' experiences. For example, Latino/a and Black students are more likely than ever to attend college, but they are more likely than whites or Asians to attend a two-year college than a four-year university. Similarly, low-income students are more likely to attend two-year versus four-year colleges (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Roderick et al., 2011; Cebulko, 2014).

Policy that only focuses on the students' qualifications and/or access to financial aid ignores the importance of schooling and college enrollment processes in shaping college access (Roderick et al., 2011). Gender plays a significant role in shaping this process. Schooling structures socialize females into gendered and racialized patterns that have consequences in their decision to attain credentials (Moore, 2011). This dissertation concentrates in examining how students find the information and support to navigate the college search and application processes to translate into enrollment in four-year institutions.

Critical theorists and particularly Phillip Jackson (1968) coined the term *hidden curriculum* as he observed that schooling rewards were attached to existing teacher and community expectations regarding values, dispositions, and behaviors in the classroom. Specific skills are positively compensated for students, such as being quiet, trying, controlling the body, completing work, staying busy, being neat and punctual, and being courteous (Margolis, 2001). Hidden curricula are then covert lessons that schools teach and often use as means of social control (Martin, 1998). Obedience and discipline are part of the hidden curriculum that reinforces societal hierarchical structures. For example, when African American students are the targets of punishment at disproportional levels, they experience low academic achievement, and a sentiment of disengagement from the academic environment (Kerpelman, 2008; Ferguson, 2000).

Human capital theories do not suffice to explain the continued existence of inequalities, or the increase of inequalities during the schooling experience. Life chances are influenced by the attainment and deployment of other forms of capital. In the context of education, resources are expressed in the form of social and cultural capital. Unfortunately, the existence of diverse forms of capital does not always yield educational profits (Lareau, 2003). Schools give differential value to students' capital. In some cases, what is deemed as valued capital for some students, like the ability to assertively ask questions, is dismissed when deployed by minority students. Instead the behavior becomes a source of tension that inhibits the schooling process (Morris, 2007; Ferguson, 2000). Institutions of education dismiss capital that minority students have which results in limited opportunities for higher education (Valenzuela, 1999).

Minority families use existing social and cultural capital to interact with such

institutions regardless of the value given by the structures (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Lareau (2003) argues that cultural practices, language and experiences guide the knowledge that helps interactions with schools. Schools reproduce inequality by only acknowledging the dominant culture capital as the norm. Lareau explicitly states “middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them on their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in home and those standards adopted by institutions.” Despite the enactment of legislation against racisms, institutions, like the educational system, continue to perpetuate cycles of inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

The legal landscape regarding the recruitment of minority students shapes the context in which families access higher education. In 2008, Initiative 424 was a ballot measure that proposed a constitutional amendment that would prohibit the state of Nebraska, thus public institutions of higher education, to grant preferential treatment to “any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.” This measure passed with 58% of the vote (Jaschik, 2008). The University of Nebraska Board of regents argued against the ban in early 2008, and in the Nebraska system website there is a commitment to uphold Affirmative Action, according to federal law, by recognizing the historical processes that have eliminated opportunities for underrepresented populations. Research on Affirmative Action bans demonstrate that there are real consequences that deter minority students for accessing equal opportunities (Hinrichs, 2010).

Research suggests that urban low-income students rely on their families and friends to access information about college, but these networks often have limited college information (Solórzano, Villalpando, Oseguera, 2005; Roderick et al., 2011). Literature on college enrollment identifies that the likelihood of enrolling in a two-year or four-year college after graduation from high schools is related to the resources provided by social networks and Latino/a students have been found to possess low levels of resources (Perna & Titus, 2005; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In 2007-08, about half of Latino/a students in college were first generation and from low income families (Santiago, 2011). In Nebraska, families accessing benefits like Foods Stamps or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families are eligible for free meals or reduced price meals under the Free/Reduced lunch program. In 2009, 32.03% of Latino/a students were eligible for the program, in 2010, 30.27% were eligible, and in 2011, 79.74% were eligible (Multicultural office of the Nebraska Department of Education, 2011). The overlap of social class and economic with Latino/a cultural and social capital may create obstacles for student enrollment in college.

Research has shown that Latino/a students encounter difficulties making a college choice and applying for college. In fact, Latino/a students planning to attend four-year colleges are less likely than all other groups to actually apply (Roderick et al., 2011). Students who are immigrants, particularly those who immigrated to the United States after the age of 10 are less likely to apply for college even if they intend to attend college. Other research has suggested that the last finding may be a reflection of issues regarding undocumented status but there is not sufficient evidence to imply that this is in fact the case (Roderick et al., 2011).

Latino/a students' context: Culture, Class and Forms of Capital

In 2010, 6.1 million Latino/a children were living in poverty, which is more than any other racial or ethnic group. It is the first time in U.S. history that the single largest group of poor children is not white (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Theories of social capital and cultural capital each have been popular for explaining variation in educational outcomes according to social class. Students with more valuable social and cultural capital fare better in school than their counterparts with less valuable social and cultural capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Pierre Bourdieu gave one of the first analyses of social capital and he defined the concept as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1985: p.248). Bourdieu focuses on the benefits that result in the participation of groups, the building of social capital, and on the purposeful creation of groups as a resource. He acknowledges that social capital can be divided into two elements: 1) social relationships allowing individuals to gain access to the resources available to their colleagues, and 2) the amount and quality of those resources. Implicitly, not all relationships or groups have access to the same amount or quality of resources (Portes, 1998).

James S. Coleman (1988) analyzed social capital as a tool to generate human capital. Coleman defined social capital by its function as “a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure” (Coleman, 1988: p. S98). For Coleman, social capital is used as a source of control, where social ties guarantee the