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Challenges and Motivations Experienced by
1st Generation Latina/o Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

As of 2014, Latinx have accounted for more than half of the United States population. Additionally, the number of Latinx students pursuing higher education is increasing across the country, yet these students have also shown to be the highest in not completing their degrees. Currently, there is much research on the challenges that Latinx first-generation students face in pursuing higher education but limited on the motivation to pursue and stay in college. This work explores what keeps Latinx driven to continue their education despite the challenges experienced. Factors such as college knowledge and adjustment to college will be addressed in this paper as well as the significant role of *familismo* which can play an important role in academic resilience but has also been indicated to cause stress among Latinx students. The aim of this investigation is to understand the aforementioned challenges of first generation Latinx students in higher education experience. Through peer-reviewed articles the information will be analyzed to better understand this phenomena.

Keywords: Latinx, students, first-generation, higher education, college, motivation, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, resiliency, familismo, challenges, Latinx students, family support, college knowledge.

Introduction

As the Latinx population is now the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Valverde & Scribner, 2001; as cited in Zalaquett, 2005) there is still a disproportionate number of students completing their education in all academic levels (Sanchez, 2001; Valverde & Scribner, 2001; as cited in Zalaquett, 2005). Moreover, Latinx students are more likely to be first-generation college students (Engle, 2006; as cited in Vega, 2016, p. 307) which generally, first-generation college students are more likely to leave college within the first two years (Ishitani, 2003; as cited in Vega, p. 308). Specifically, among first-generation Latinx students (FGLCS) in higher education this disparity is more frequent as only 7% graduate with bachelor's degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Often, (FGLCS) aim for a college degree in order to insure future financial stability, be a role model for younger relatives, and more career opportunities (). These students are faced with the pressure of being their first in the family to pursue a college career and they do so without much guidance.

Additionally, Latinx college students experience challenges throughout their education such as discrimination and acculturative stress (Corona et al., 2017). Thus, (FGLCS) tend to be prone to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation (Corona et al., 2003; Vela et al., 2018). However, scholars have indicated that with these challenges, there are students overcoming them whether it is building support systems in college (i.e. friends, clubs, organizations), cultural pride, family support also known as *familismo* (Rodriguez et al., 2003; Consoli et al., 2015). Various studies have examined the challenges that (FGLCS) confront towards attaining a college degree as well as how they overcome them but there is little research that investigates the motivations of (FGLCS) to continue in their pursuit. Therefore, this paper

seeks to explore the challenges and motivations faced by first generation Latinx students, specifically, regarding academic stressors and academic resilience.

Literature Review

Challenges Experienced in College

Although, graduating with a degree is a great accomplishment for many people, first-generation college students (FGCS) often face conflicts unlike second generation students in their pursuit towards higher education. Among first-generation Latinx college students (FGLCS) population this quest only becomes more difficult as they may experience pressure to choose between familiar culture and academics (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003; Nevarez, 2001; as cited in Gloria and Castellanos, 2012). Moreover, they are challenged in trying to navigate through college on their own, as their family doesn't have an educational background to guide them towards resources necessary to obtain a degree (Tym, McMillion, Barone, and Webster, 2004; as cited in Gloria and Castellanos, 2012). According to Cerda-Lizarraga (2015), first-generation Latinx college students are at greater risk for not finishing college degrees than any other ethnic groups (p. 9). This paper will briefly discuss challenges experienced by first-generation Latinx students in higher education, specifically, regarding 'college knowledge' and adjustment into college.

For first-generation college students it is difficult knowing how or where to begin applying for college. Due to these students being the first in their family to pursue higher education, their parents often have a low educational attainment or have no knowledge about college, therefore, cannot be of much assistance to the student. A study by Saenz et al., (2007) found that this reality is relevant for many Latinx students pursuing a 4-year institution (as cited in; Cerda-Lizarraga, p. 29). In addition, FGLCS tend to struggle through the university whether it is in finding resources that will help them or support networks. According to, Longwell-Grice et

al., (2016) students are more motivated when stakeholders show that they also care about them and not only the majority culture. Longwell-Grice et al., (2016) suggest that advising units should be established for these students as a network of support and to build a strong relationship with the students before they arrive to campus. If we take into consideration the challenges that first-generation Latinx students face in the process to attend college or achieve, it is critical that this relationship is established among the future college, the student, and the family. Due to the family also not being familiar with the college process, perhaps involving them in it will further help the students gain family support for the years ahead.

Familismo - Resilience or Stressor

In a study by Velez (2010), first generation Latina college students family role is studied, specifically, what their role was prior to leaving for college and the changes experienced by the family/self once the student was at college. The balancing of college life and family roles may be considered a stressor as students attempt to balance out the rigorous demands of school and assisting the family. This study consisted of, first generation Latinas that participated in individual interviews. From these interviews, we see the change in their ‘cultural role’ among the alumnae (from entering college, graduating and returning home). A theme found was, the importance of prioritizing family which caused stress and pressure to fulfil family roles/obligations in order to please their caregiver during their college careers.

In another study by Gloria and Castellanos (2012) found that first generation Latina students, often struggled in getting to college as the family questioned their choice to leave home to attend school. Because *familismo* is the concept of connectedness to the home and family, and fulfilling those obligations some of the participants would be accused of abandoning the family, making the process much more difficult. Consequently, this resulted in these students to need to balance family and school life, especially when family required them to maintain consistent

contact. The need to balance school and family life may be challenging for first generation Latinx students, as they are still confronting other dilemmas within the university atmosphere whether it is finding a support network, discrimination, access to resources.

On the other hand, other scholars have indicated that *familismo* is a tool for the students to achieve academically. Corona et al., (2017), explored the correlation between cultural values and cultural stressors on the mental health of Latina/o students (43% being first generation students). Specifically, the cultural value *familismo* is described as the connectedness with one's family and tend to be crucial in career decisions. Regarding this cultural value, this study found that there was a significant correlation in *familismo* and acculturative stress. For example, the students that had low 'familism support' showed to have a connection with acculturative stress and the depressive symptoms being experienced. Ultimately, it was indicated that on average the participants reported "moderate to high levels of psychological stress, and low to moderate levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms" (p.68). The results from this study, serve as an illustration of how *familismo* may impact first-generation Latina/o students well-being while in school, especially those with limited access to the cultural values (i.e. *familismo*). Therefore, the students with greater family connectedness were more prone to achieve academically as *familismo* assisted in their pursuit for their college degree.

In addition Ceballo (2004), looked into the role of parents of first-generation Latinx college students and whether their commitment to their child education made a significance. This study found that, because many of these parents did not complete a degree/education, they made their child's education a priority and encouraged them to pursue a college degree as it a "vehicle to escape poverty" (as cited in Vega, 2016, p. 309). Perhaps, having a parent's support is a tool necessary for first-generation Latinx students to be motivated throughout their education. It is

critical that we understand how family can play a significant role for the students, whether it is as a cause of stressor or a tool for resiliency. Perhaps, *familismo* can become problematic when the family obligations become too much for the student and in return they get little to no support from the family. In contrast, when the FGLCS family obligations are minimal to none and have significant family support, their undergraduate careers can be much more successful than the former. Brenes (2012) supposes “the higher the support received collectively, the higher the academic motivation” (p. 35).

Motivation to Pursue & Stay in College

Some scholars have found that Latinx students are often more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and be first-generation students in higher education (Engle, 2006; as cited in Vega, 2016). Although it has been shown that these students tend to face greater challenges in their college education (e.g. low-SES, resources, cultural aspects), there is still limited research looking into these students' educational process “in terms of how [they] make the decision to attend college and what factors contribute to their successful enrollment and persistence” (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Reyes & Nora, 2012; as cited in Vega, 2016, p. 307). Researchers have found a great link between “personal motivation and academic success” (Anderson & Keith, 1997; Wentzel, 2000; as cited in Brenes, 2012, p. 34) yet, Latinx students in their first year tend to have a low retention rate (Hawley & Harris, 2005; as cited in Fong et al., 2016).

Vega (2016), conducted in a study in which first-generation Latinx students in a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) were interviewed and asked questions about how being a first-generation Latinx student has shaped their life or what motivates them to complete college. From this research four main themes emerged being: (1) academic rigor, (2) support networks, (3) internal motivation and (4) responsibility as a first-generation college student. In regard to internal motivation, the students mentioned setting goals for themselves such as graduating

within four years or feeling a sense of responsibility to complete college for their family and be a role model. One of the students mentions, “being a first-generation, it’s scary but, yeah, it’s empowering. I’m sort of doing something the odds were against” (p. 315). Perhaps, these sense of internal motivation is deemed critical in order to complete their college degree regardless of the challenges that are faced along the way.

Some scholars have defined student motivation as; academic effort, education aspirations, importance placed in school, and personal determination (Brenes, 2012). Other scholars have utilized the concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation; in which the student is driven by different interests. Extrinsic motivation can be thought of as doing activities because of external incentives (.e.g getting a bad grade) and intrinsic motivation is when students have a genuine interest in doing an activity (e.g. reads more than what is required to develop critical thinking skills) rather than it being driven by external results (Ryan & Deci, 2000; as cited in Gizdarska, 2017, p. 3). These concepts are utilized in Gizdarska’s study among Latinx students in which the goal is to understand the motivations for students attending college as well as how those motivations differ from other ethnic groups. The researcher hypothesized the Latinx students would be intrinsically motivated than the latter but also attend college with the goal to “assist their families and prove their worth to others” (p.20). Ultimately, the study found that achievement motivation or reasons to attend college did not differ among ethnic groups (Hispanic and Non-Hispanic participants). Although this study did not focus on first-generation Latinx undergraduate students, it is a significant starting point in the literature as, first-generation students are more likely to face more challenges throughout their academic career. Therefore, their motivations may differ in the sense that they are driven by more aspects to achieve academically.

Conclusion

As first-generation Latinx students in higher education increasingly enroll into colleges there is still a low rate of degree completion. For these students, they face many challenges along the way from having minimal knowledge about the college process and adjusting into the university atmosphere. Being the first in the family to attend college can be difficult within itself, as there is no guidance to pursue a degree in the first place (unless high school has resources to assist the students in the process). Additionally, having family support has shown to be crucial for these students to achieve academically as well as serving as a tool of motivation for the students. The family role is significant in the student's success throughout their college career as well as in staying in college. Some scholars have indicated that first-generation Latinx students tend to discontinue their undergraduate career by their first year in school, which may be as a result of the challenges experienced (e.g. minimal family support, navigating through college). Therefore, it is imperative that as FGLCS have support from their education system to have access to resources necessary to assist them in the process to college/university. Based on the literature, there is a gap in understanding whether first-generation Latinx college students motivation is based from intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Ultimately, future research should seek to gather information about these students experiences especially if they are the growing number of students enrolling in colleges but not completing their degrees.

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