

2018

# Latinos: Breaking the Barrier of College Education Completion

Wendolyn J. Martinez

*Eastern Washington University*, [wmartinez1@eagles.ewu.edu](mailto:wmartinez1@eagles.ewu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw\\_2018](https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw_2018)

---

## Recommended Citation

Martinez, Wendolyn J., "Latinos: Breaking the Barrier of College Education Completion" (2018). *2018 Symposium*. 3.  
[https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw\\_2018/3](https://dc.ewu.edu/scrw_2018/3)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the EWU Student Research and Creative Works Symposium at EWU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2018 Symposium by an authorized administrator of EWU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jotto@ewu.edu](mailto:jotto@ewu.edu).

Latinos: Breaking the Barrier of College Education Completion

Wendolyn J. Martinez

Faculty Mentor: Martin Meraz Garcia, Ph.D.

Eastern Washington University

Authors Note:

Wendolyn J. Martinez is an Eastern Washington University Student. This paper was submitted for consideration to the 21st Annual EWU Research and creative Works Symposium on March 2018 in Cheney, WA and submitted for Introduction to Chicanx/Latinx Culture

(CHST 101/ANTH161)

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Wendolyn J. Martinez

Contact: [wmartinez1@eagles.ewu.edu](mailto:wmartinez1@eagles.ewu.edu)

## Abstract

After being met with disadvantage for years Latinos have begun to break away from stereotypes and reaching new highs in college enrollment as the group experiences reduced high school dropout rates. Despite the high rate of Latino college enrollment, low completion rates of bachelor's and associate degree programs persist. The goal of this project is to identify the barriers Latinos experience while attending higher education, prompting them to drop out and suggest solutions to these problems. Through the analysis of data from scholarly sources and the U.S Census Bureau, conclusions are drawn on the reasons Latinos have such a low college completion rate and solutions are offered on how to improve the retention and completion rates of this population.

Keywords: Latina/o, retention, graduation, Hispanic Serving Institutions, higher education, barriers

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

### Introduction

Latinos have been breaking barriers of stereotypes and oppression in America for decades. Recently it has been found that Latinos have begun to break through and away from their most recent barrier - the completion of high school- with high school graduation rates currently at an all-time high, and dropout rates at an all-time low. With an all-time high in high school graduation Latinos have started running toward higher education institutes in order to obtain degrees in such high volumes they continue to break records with high enrollment rates. Despite these record high enrollment rates, college graduation rates within the demographic have not been able to keep up. With the graduation gap Latinos are currently facing the question, why? An important factor that also plays well into helping Latinos achieve higher education is the role which Hispanic Serving Institutions play on helping Latino students graduate. In order to help the Latino demographic in achieving their goals of a college education the focus must also be shifted to what can be done to improve Latino college graduation rates.

### Background

A recent article from The Pew Research Center, *Hispanic dropout rate hits new low, college enrollment at new high* highlights the many improvements Latinos have accomplished within recent years relating to their improved rates of secondary education retention and success. Readers are informed about 3 major accomplishments within the Latino demographic – falling dropout rates, record high graduation rates, and astonishing college enrollment rates. The high school dropout rate for Latinos has been constantly dropping over the last decade and, “has fallen to a new low... [of] 10% in 2016...5 years earlier, the rate had been 16%” (Gramlich, 2017). With lower dropout rates around the nation it’s not a surprise that the effects are giving Latinos a new reputation. With more students staying in school it’s not a mystery that college campuses

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

are seeing a growing rate of the Latino student body. In 2016, according to the U.S census Bureau, “47% of Hispanic high school graduates ages 18 to 24 were enrolled in college, up from 32% in 1999” (Gramlich, 2017). Not only was this growth staying constant, but it also matches the rate of non-Hispanic whites which enrolled in college during the same year at 47%. Though in recent years this trend of moving upwards has not been reflected within the college completion and retention rates of Latino students.

Currently in the United States, students entering college are completing their degree programs at an overall rate of 56.1% in 2016 as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) in their 2017 report titled *A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity*. The NSCRC report found that non-Hispanic whites are graduating at a rate above the overall rate at 63% of enrolled whites completing their education with either an associates or bachelor’s degree. Latinos represent the other side of the spectrum with only 45.8% of college enrolled Latinos earning a degree under 6 years (NSC Research Center, 2017). The problem found here is that Latinos are enrolling at the exact same rate but graduating with almost a 20-point difference between the two demographics. The question presented is why only 45.8% of Latinos are obtaining a higher education degree, but there is not just one definite answer. Many factors may go into why Latino students are not able to complete college, ranging from resources to preparation and type of college this demographic has attended.

### Barriers

After reviewing various sources, the most prominent barriers Latinos face on their path to degree attainment were found to be a lack of preparation for college, poverty, lack of available resources in college and high school, a sense of not belonging in higher education, and the path

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

which they choose to achieve their degrees. When viewed as a whole many can see that each problem relates to one another and maybe because by a different barrier.

It's not a surprise that being under prepared for college will lead to dropping out within any demographic, especially when there are few to no resources offered for these struggling students. When the fact that the poverty rate of the Latino/ Hispanic demographic within the United states is more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic white. The U.S census reported that in 2016, "The poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites was 8.8%" while 19.4% of Latinos lived in poverty (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Even though Latinos still felt a drop in their poverty rates, which were 21.4% in 2015, it still has a large effect on communities and surrounding school systems. Since the poverty rate of Latinos is twice as much of non-Latino whites, it's not difficult to pin point why many Latinos aren't prepared for the college environment and work load when they lack resources from early on because of low funds within their school systems, especially in urban areas.

Latinos make up a small portion of the college going student body, a majority of them being first-generation college students. Out of all first-generation college students Hispanics makes up 27% of that demographic as reported by the U.S Department of Education. That number may seem much anger when only 9% of continuing generation students were apart of the Latino demographic (Redford & Hoyer, 2017, pp. 7-8). Many Latino students are unaware about navigating life as a college student and often times feel as if they do not belong in this environment. The transition to college is one that to many Latinos is very foreign and often there is feelings of culture shock. When arriving at school the probability of a negative climate and perspective is not rare with minority students, "students of Color were more likely to perceive more racial tension on campus...students that perceived racial tensions on their campus also

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

reported lower levels of sense of belonging” (Garcia, 2017, p. 26). When someone feels as if they are not welcomed in a community leaving makes a lot more sense to them than staying. It’s a difficult position to be in and that type of stress can also contribute to a low academic performance.

One of the most important factors which goes into the low college completion rates of Latinos is their path they choose to take in order to complete their education. Excelencia in Education reported that Latinos are more likely to begin in a community college, enroll with a mix of full-time and part-time attendance, and are more likely to be in college after six-years which can affect the results of studies because most cut off at a 6-year graduation rate. (Santiago & Cuzzo, 2018). With every path Latino pulled the short straw, more than 50% of Latinos begin in a community college and only 11% of those students receive a four-year degree within six years. Mixed enrollment Latino students make up 63% of Latino students attempting to achieve a higher education degree, but only 11% of them graduate under or by their 6<sup>th</sup> year of enrollment. Excelencia in Education reported that Latinos do have the largest rate of persistence in achieving their degrees with almost 50% of graduates beginning at 2-year programs, but if institutions were able to help a larger bulk of Latino students earn degrees than their might be a large shift in the perspective Latinos are currently seen under.

When entering college these students begin to lack support early on in most universities, especially predominantly white institutions, as they do not provide or advertise resources for struggling minority students. Some of the only schools seeing a constant trend in a rising number of Latino degree earners are Hispanic Serving Institutions. If colleges are able to incorporate a similar environment and resource center for Latino student, it’s possible for Latinos to begin breaking the barrier of college completion.

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

### Hispanic Serving Institutions

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) have been a vital step in helping Latino students complete their education. In the 2016-2017 school year HSIs enrolled 65% of the Latino undergraduate population (Excelencia in Education, 2018). With more than half of the Latino undergraduate population, Hispanic serving institutions have the largest influence on this demographic and the ability to create the largest change in this problem. However, HSIs only represent about 15% of higher education institutions including 2-year and 4-year institutions and don't have to be predominantly Hispanic, only 25% of the institutions population must be Hispanic to qualify as a Hispanic serving institution (Excelencia in Education, 2018). Even under these circumstances HSIs are still continuing to make strides towards better the education and retention of Latino students within the United States.

A recent study done by The Education Trust brings to light the improvements Latino students show when attending Hispanic Serving Institutions compared to non-HSIs. Dividing the students between the selectivity of the colleges which they enrolled in the study found that those who attended HSIs graduated at a higher rate and had a smaller completion rate gap between Latino and White students. In the group that went to the least selective colleges, and had the largest amount of HSIs, the point gap within the HSI was 7% and the non-HSIs was an 8.5% gap, Latino students in the Hispanic Serving Institutions graduated at a .6% higher rate than the non-Hispanic Serving Institutions (Nichols, 2017). A larger difference can be seen in the group that attended the most selective colleges which they chose to report on. This group included the most non-HIS, 116, and the least number of HIS with 18 higher education institutions. In this group there was only a 3% gap between the graduation of Latino students (61.9) and Whites students (64.9). This is a vast improvement compared to the non-HSIs which had a 8.6% gap

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

between Latino and white students, which only graduated 58.4% of Latino students compared to the 66.9% of white students who earned degrees that year (Nichols, 2017). Hispanic Serving Institutions are creating a better environment for Latino students and allowing them to thrive and achieve their potential.

### Solutions

As research continues looking into helping the Latino demographic complete their degrees at a higher rate more and more solutions and programs are being found and implemented. Excelencia in Education maintains a 'Growing What Works' database in order to help institutions see what works for Latino students. The four core solutions which were found were first year support programs, family engagement programs, pathway & pipeline programs, and lastly summer bridge programs. Many of these programs combat multiple barriers Latinos face while attending college.

First-year programs which were highlighted for helping Latino undergraduates succeed were the College Assistant Migrant Program (CAMP) and the Center for English Language Acquisition and Culture at Saint Peter University. These programs, "Establish mentoring relationships and peer networks that support students to persist and graduate" (Santiago & Cuzzo, 2018) and help ensure that students become aware of the resources which are provided at the university which can help combat against low retention due to lack of resources when resources were not previously known about. CAMP also helps retain first-year students, in 2016 96.5% of CAMP participants continued their education the following year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Family engagement programs help combat the common feeling of not feeling welcomed into the college environment. Programs such as the Spanish Language orientation at the University of North Texas and the Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program at Arizona State

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

University help create a family investment in a college education to help students feel supported by their family because college is a life-altering decision and support is an important factor in completing one's education (Santiago & Cuzzo, 2018). Pathway & pipeline programs and summer bridge programs both work similarly and help prepare students for the next level of education they wish to complete whether it be at a 2-year university or a 4-year university. The Long Beach College Promise program at Long Beach City College and Students Transition in Academics & Reaching Success at Cabrillo College help students prepare for higher education in order to relieve the stress of catching up to their peers if their secondary education was not taught as well as their white counterparts (Santiago & Cuzzo, 2018). These programs help reverse the largest issue Latinos face, not being prepared for a higher education and help retain students as they feel a larger sense of confidence in their academic ability.

However, most of these programs focus on first-year retention and continuing student still have a chance of dropping out. In order to combat the incompleteness of continuing student's schools can look towards programs such as the Trio's Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair) and how Multicultural Greek life help Latino students continue their education. The purpose of the McNair program is to help underrepresented groups achieve graduate degrees. Students who apply to the McNair program already show a perseverance in achieving their higher education degree, in the 2015-2016 school year 100% of students from Eastern Washington University graduated with their bachelor's degree and were accepted into Post-Baccalaureate Programs. 75% of these students come from both low-income families and are first-generation college students (Eastern Washington University, 2016).

Multicultural Greek life is an alternative to traditional Greek life with focus on the social aspects of college. Multicultural Greeks often join these types of sororities and fraternities

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

because they offer something traditional Greek life does not, the educational aspects of their culture which has been left out many textbooks throughout the United States (Cerejido, 2017). Latino Greek life has the ability to counter college culture shock and create a community where Latinos feel at home in their home away from home. The first Latino fraternity, Phi Iota Alpha, was created to help foreign Latino males preserve their culture and achieve academic success. After it's revival in 1984 the purpose of Phi Iota Alpha became about learning who they were and retaining as many Latinos in higher education as possible. Giovanni Abril, a trustee to the fraternity said, "from conversations that we've had with higher education administrators, our counterparts, that we are an integral part in the retention of Latino males in institutions of higher learning" (Cerejido, 2017). Multicultural Greek life is what has help students achieve their goals because it provides the confidence and welcoming environment necessary.

### Conclusion

Latinos have been struggling to achieve the same college retention rates as their White counterparts, but as more and more focus is turned towards helping this demographic reach their goals of degree attainment the possibility of achieving similar rates becomes more plausible. With programs and institutions such as the Ronald E. McNair program and Excelencia in Education focusing their time and effort on improving minority education rates many see that change is already beginning. If institutions take the time to look into the results that have been shown by Hispanic Serving Institutions and various other core solution provided, Latinos will begin to break this barrier along with others.

## References

- Arizona State University. (2017). *Fraternity & Sorority Life 2016-2017 Annual Report*. Tempe: Arizona State University.
- Bell, N. E. (2012). Data Sources: A Profile of McNair Scholars. *GradEdge: Insight and Research on Graduate Education*, 4-5. Retrieved from Council of Graduate Students.
- Cerejido, A. (2017, May 12). *Pledging While Brown: What it Means to be a Latino Greek*. Retrieved from NPR-Latino USA: <http://latinousa.org/2017/05/12/pledging-brown-means-latino-greek/>
- Eastern Washington University. (2016). *Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program Fall 2016 Newsletter*. Cheney: eastern Washington University.
- Excelencia in Education. (2018). *Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2016-2017*. Excelencia in Education.
- Garcia, C. E. (2017). *Latinx College Students Sense of Belonging: The Role of Campus Subculture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
- Gramlich, J. (2017, September 29). *Hispanic dropout rate hits new low, college enrollment at new high*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/29/hispanic-dropout-rate-hits-new-low-college-enrollment-at-new-high/>
- Nichols, A. (2017, Decemeber 14). *A Look at Latino Success*. Retrieved from The Education Trust: <https://edtrust.org/resource/look-latino-student-success/>
- NSC Research Center. (2017, April 26). *Signature 12 Supplement: Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity – Fall 2010 Cohort*.

## LATINOS: BREAKING THE BARRIER OF COLLEGE EDUCATION COMPLETION

Retrieved from National Student Clearinghouse Research Center:

<https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12-supplement-2/>

Redford, J., & Hoyer, K. M. (2017). *First Generation College Students: A Comparison of High School and Postsecondary Experiences*. Washington D.C.: U.S Department of Education.

Santiago, D., & Cuzzo, M. (2018). *College Completion through a Latino Lens*. Washington D.C: Excelencia in Education.

Semega, J. L., Fontenot, K. R., & Kollar, M. A. (2017). *Income and Poverty Rates in The United States:2016*. Washington D.C: U.S Census Bureau.

U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *HEA: College Assistance Migrant Program (OESE)*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.