

Access and Opportunity for Latina/o Undocumented College Students: Familial and Institutional Support Factors

Patricia A. Pérez

California State University, Fullerton

James L. Rodríguez

California State University, Fullerton

Abstract

This article focused on the educational experiences of Latina/o undocumented college students attending a public Hispanic-Serving Institution. Familial and institutional factors that promote educational opportunities are explored. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews serve as the data source for this exploratory, qualitative study. Interview transcripts were coded into central themes within the broader categories of familial and institutional agent support and influences. Findings indicated that familial support factors included “non-traditional” forms of encouragement. Specifically, familial factors sorted into the themes of 1) listening and understanding; 2) goal-setting; and 3) motivation. Meanwhile, support factors from institutional agents were mixed in regard to effectively facilitating the college-going process. Recommendations for policy and practice are presented in light of the findings. This article contributes to the conversation regarding the education of Latinas/os by sharing their voice and using their experiences to promote greater access, opportunity, and success in higher education.

Introduction

The U.S. is in the midst of significant demographic shifts that are transforming its population. California is on the leading edge of this transformation as it is no longer a white majority state with Latinas/os representing the second largest ethnic group (32.4%) behind Whites (46.7%, U.S. Census, 2010). As California’s ethnic population shift continues, debates over immigration policy are ongoing. These debates are focused on Latina/o populations, and the subsequent impacts are primarily felt by Latinas/os. The relatively youthful demographics of Latinas/os, their historical underrepresentation in higher education, and deep cuts to education funding place them in a precarious position and there is a critical need for resources, access, and opportunity throughout the educational spectrum (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

In this article, we focus on the educational experiences of undocumented Latina/o college students attending a public university in California. More specifically, we explore familial and institutional factors that promote educational access and college opportunity. Our aim is to contribute to the conversation surrounding the state of education for Latinas/os by sharing their voice and using their experiences to promote greater access to higher education.

Support for Latina/o Undocumented College Students

Demographic shifts have given rise to increased attention to the educational plight of Latinas/os. This is particularly evident in research on Latina/o college students. The heightened focus on immigration policy has resulted in a scholarship vein highlighting the educational experiences of undocumented college students. In a qualitative investigation, Contreras (2009) examined the role of in-state tuition laws in facilitating higher education for undocumented Latina/o students in Washington State. The Washington State in-state tuition law, or HB 10791¹, makes undocumented students who have lived in the state at least three years and have graduated from a Washington State high school eligible to pay in-state tuition rates. Contreras (2009) focused on the role of legal status in the higher education experiences of undocumented Latina/o students as well as

¹ Several states have their own in-state tuition legislation

any differences that emerged based on institutional type. Contreras (2009) found that critical themes emerged, including, constant fear, financial difficulty, a hostile campus climate, resiliency, and the hope to give back to their communities. Additionally, Contreras (2009) found, although guidance differed by institutional type, across institutions there appeared to be a general lack of knowledge of HB 1079. Those most apt to be knowledgeable about HB 1079 were of a Latina/o background or diversity office personnel. Lack of general college knowledge and financial aid information has been a consistent research finding (Contreras, 2011).

Based on his work with high-achieving undocumented students, Pérez (2010a) puts forth several recommendations for student services personnel to better serve students. He noted that outreach, facilitating transfer, providing financial aid assistance, and social support and services will support undocumented students through higher education. Further, the author asserted that training for institutional agents was essential to properly addressing the needs of undocumented students, including specialized training for school psychologists and counselors in order to provide much-needed social and emotional aid (Pérez, 2010a).

Pérez (2010b) highlights that outreach professionals can create “opportunity,” or college access, by giving students the option to attend a postsecondary institution vis-à-vis college information. Further, familial and peer networks and contacts were found to be instrumental in Latina/o students’ college decision-making process. For example, Pérez (2010b) noted,

Older siblings served as mentors who were able to guide their younger siblings through the college choice process. In each case older siblings were also undocumented and could refer their younger counterparts to pre-established contacts who were former or current advisors, professors and mentors who could assist them. These contacts were unquestionably helpful and supportive to the younger siblings in their own college-going endeavors (p. 26).

At the community college level, Oseguera, Flores and Burciaga (2010) concur with findings by Pérez (2010b) that student affairs personnel played key roles in access to higher education for undocumented students.

Meanwhile, Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) underscored the importance of parent and peer networks as well as extracurricular activities in the higher education academic success of undocumented students in California. More specifically, in a study on the role of social and environmental risk factors on academic resilience, Pérez et al. (2009) argued that supportive relationships with friends and parents, along with school engagement, facilitated educational success (as defined by high school GPA, high school awards received, and number of Honors/AP courses taken). For those students most at-risk, access to resources helped to buffer adversity (Pérez et al., 2009).

In a quantitative study looking at the persistence rates of Latina/o students eligible for instate tuition policies and their U.S. counterparts at a selective, public university in Texas, Flores and Horn (2009) noted that while their findings were limited they shed light on the role of instate tuition assistance to facilitate persistence rates among undocumented students. Specifically, they highlight that undocumented students had similar persistence rates in comparison to their U.S. counterparts. However, Flores and Horn (2009) offer, “While we document the academic role, the social forces that impact the college student, especially as defined by organizational, psychological, and sociological frameworks, remain unexamined with current data” (p. 71). That is, those influences attributed to social networks and institutional agents would not have been captured in their study.

Existing research on Latina/o undocumented students emphasizes the important role of institutional support and state policy in supporting students into and through higher education. In addition, the function of student affairs professionals and familial networks is also outlined in previous research. However, less of the existing research points to the manners in which these players assist undocumented Latina/o students. In their own voice, this exploratory, qualitative study sheds light on strategies and influences to assist more Latina/o students through higher education. Ultimately, per Pérez (2010b), research focused on the higher education endeavors of undocumented students “will inspire more focused research that will ultimately improve practice” (p. 24).

Social Capital

Within education, social capital underscores the relationships between students, families, communities and teachers, and their potential to support and motivate students toward academic success. Social capital theory captures the effects of the school, parents and community on a students' learning environment (Coleman, 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Yosso (2005) incorporated this concept within her larger community cultural wealth framework, defining social capital as "networks of people and community resources." However, research highlights that possessing social capital does not always equate with a positive outcome (Portes, 1998). Per school-based social capital, counselors, teachers and other personnel have the potential to assist and encourage students onto some form of higher education but this assumes students have access to these resources in the first place (McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Through a social capital lens, this study captures important network influences and agents on the college-going experiences of undocumented Latina/o students. Herein, the goal is to increase the number of Latinas/os pursuing higher education.

Significance of Study

This study sought to understand familial and institutional support factors Latina/o undocumented students used to progress through the educational pipeline to access higher education. Using in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as the primary data source as well as a protocol developed to capture social capital influences within families and educational institutions, this investigation contributes a more holistic understanding of the Latina/o undocumented college student plight. Interview questions included when and why students decided to attend college; whether family, peers, and/or institutions/agents encouraged college going; and the role of immigration status in their college-going experience. To better understand the Latina/o undocumented college opportunity experience, this investigation was guided by the following question: What role did familial and institutional factors play in the college opportunity process for undocumented Latina/o students?

Methods

Participants

The total sample for this research investigation included fifteen participants (seven female, eight male). All participants attended a public, four-year postsecondary institution located in the diverse state of California. This site was selected for its location within the state and for its reputation as being an "undocumented student friendly" postsecondary institution. The postsecondary institution has also been designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution since 2004.

For consistency purposes, all participants met the following criteria: a) came from a Latina/o ethnic background; b) were first-generation college students where neither parent (or guardian) had attained an Associate's or Bachelor's degree in the U.S.; c) were transfer-bound or transfer students; d) came from a low-SES background as determined by parent's occupation(s) and educational background; and f) were undocumented students. Prospective students were identified and recruited through word of mouth, class announcements, fliers where necessary to recruit additional participants, and recommendations. Students were informed about the study, the purpose of the investigation and that anonymity would be maintained in any reported results.

Instruments and Data Collection

The primary data collection instrument was an interview protocol based on social capital theory to better understand the college opportunity experience of the participants through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Data was collected between March 2008 and May 2010. Most interviews took place at the participants' respective campus and each interview lasted approximately one hour. According to Creswell (2003), interviews provide the

opportunity for participants to speak to a particular topic more in-depth. Interviews were conducted by a bilingual research team composed of undergraduate research assistants and one of the authors. Interview data were tape-recorded and transcribed by the research team members. Participants were given the option of reviewing the transcriptions and results and editing in whole or in part any text they saw fit. This process was useful in making sure that we did not misinterpret the results or misconstrue what a student was attempting to get at (Maxwell, 1996).

Data Analysis

Data was managed, coded and analyzed by the authors. Coding and analysis resulted in several topical themes within two broad categories: (1) family support and influences and (2) institutional agent support and influences. Although social capital was used as a framework to guide this investigation, the authors were also open to alternate explanations or theories to interpret findings (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Results

Family Support and Influences

In general, this exploratory study revealed the presence of informal, familial support factors. Familial support factors identified were embedded within the home/family context as opposed to the educational context. Within the theme of family support and influences, three sub-themes emerged: a) listening and understanding; 2) goal-setting; and 3) motivation. These themes provide an indication of the psychological support provided by families. This support is somewhat defined and limited by the pragmatics of the living situation.

As previous research has documented (Pérez, 2010b), undocumented students may not live with their immediate families. That is, their families are living in their countries of origin while they find themselves in the U.S. In this study, while some undocumented students were separated from their immediate families, this did not mean that they did not feel supported in their academic endeavors. In such cases, familial support came in the form of encouragement through regular phone calls where listening was instrumental. Jaime shares,

Everything was on the phone. I called my mom every time and I would say mom I just enrolled for Math 185, that's calculus, and she'd say "oh I'm glad, I'm happy for you, just keep going." She wouldn't actually see me doing it. I would always say what I did in school like I got nominated for something in a certain club and she would just listen to me but she wouldn't really understand what I was saying and my family was really supportive even though they were in Mexico. They were always supporting me, listening to the things I have to say and that's how I got the support from my family. Mostly not physically seeing them but knowing that they were there.

Jaime felt supported by his mother because she offered encouragement and motivation through their conversations. It was not necessarily important to him that she understand what he was conveying- he was content that she was happy he was continuing with his education.

The second theme related to familial support and influences involving goal setting. The following excerpts highlight the abstract and powerful function of setting goals that involved positive objectives rather than concrete outcomes:

Viviana: "My family, just knowing that they don't have a stable job, that breaks my heart all the time so that obviously encouraged me from a young age [to pursue a higher education]- that I wanted to have a stable job. I don't want to get paid a lot but I want a stable job because I saw that."

Jaime: "She went to get some money from the bank and she said 'Well, when you grow up I want you to

be like that guy, like the bank teller. Wearing a suit and being somebody in life. Not just a construction worker.”

Iliana: “Well my dad...he is an accountant, he has a degree in accounting [from a Mexican university] and...but he’s not with us right now and my mom always told us that we should follow my dad’s steps and go to school and get our education so we don’t struggle throughout life looking for a job so we don’t work...we don’t live paycheck by paycheck like she does right now; so we don’t work with our hands but with our mind.”

In the previous examples, students discussed that family encouraged pursuing an education, “being somebody,” stable employment, steady pay, and discouraged manual labor. Interestingly, family never explicitly stated to obtain a college degree, rather they encouraged this abstract idea of pursuing an education.

The final theme related to familial support and influences including motivation in the form of encouragement and expectations. In many cases, students were encouraged to pursue higher education because they had older siblings who had attended or were attending some form of postsecondary education whether in the U.S. or in their native country. Family members also motivated their children to attend college by sharing stories of dreams deferred and serving as living examples of the consequences of not going to college. For example, Mateo shared,

When I was young, every day at dinner it was the same thing, ‘Look at how tired I am today. I don’t want you to have to come home this tired,’ and it was always from when I can remember, and also I really appreciated the fact that they [family] always told me I was smart and that also kept me motivated and I really appreciated that from my family because it was support that I wasn’t receiving at school. So I think if it wouldn’t have been for my parents, I don’t think I would have been as motivated [to attend college].

Similarly, Moises offered,

I remember my father taking me to school telling me “you know what do your best, try to learn as much as you can” and he also told me his stories that he couldn’t. He wanted to go to get ahead and go to la secundaria [middle school] and college or further but he couldn’t- he had to work and support his family.

Indeed, family and most notably parents, played active roles in the lives of these undocumented Latina/o students whether physically present or not.

Institutional Agent Support and Influences

Although data related to support from institutional agents were mixed, for the most part students spoke very highly of and referenced influential high school teachers and/or proactive college counselors that made it possible for the students in this sample to attend higher education. For example, Vanessa asserted,

I started this program at high school, JROTC, where I met this instructor, which was my tutor, my friend...he was in a sense like my father because he challenged me. He was the one that would challenge me in everything- so going to college was not a big thing once I met him and once I knew my potential that I could do it.

Another student spoke very highly of his English as a Second Language instructor who also doubled as his Introduction to Leadership instructor. He argued,

One of my professors from ESL classes, the English as a Second Language, I think that he was very influential in my life, I’m not sure why maybe his passion for teaching or the way he structured classes. All of the examples he gave, we would pretend that we were in really life, not just in class.

Antonio asserted that his community college counselor was very helpful. He stated, "...she opened the door to me...she said 'you know what you can do it, you can go ahead.' She actually helped me fill out the application..."

However, because of their precarious immigrant status position and previous academic experiences with school personnel, some students remained skeptical. Lourdes offered,

I knew that he was trying to help me out but once I got into college and I wouldn't see much of him I started wondering if he was just a counselor trying to get people into [Community] College and not helping them all the way through...Because I had all my trust in him and he was the first that taught me everything and I thought that he was going to guide me a little bit and he never really did.

Unfortunately, as a result of a lack of information amongst institutional personnel, one student discussed paying an exorbitant fee when initially starting college. For example, Claudia mentioned that she was forced to pay \$5,000 as an international student because her high school counselor was unaware of in-state tuition policies. Meanwhile, Ana Rosa noted that the information she received from her community college was insufficient:

I feel that it wasn't really accurate because he helped me with the application process and I wish he would have told me how the system worked; you know what activities or services were at school and I didn't get that information.

As a result of such experiences, Miguel made it a habit to triangulate college information. Miguel noted that he would ask different people the same questions and draw his own conclusions based on their responses. This would also help him decide who was giving him accurate information and if he needed to move on and ask another person for guidance.

Discussion

This study used interviews with undocumented Latina/o college students to understand familial and institutional supports. This study provides a greater understanding of the role and nature of family and institutional factors in the educational experiences of Latina/o undocumented college students attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution. For example, familial factors identified in this study were, for the most part, informal, and embedded within the family/home context. Institutional factors were more formal and embedded within the educational context. The contrast between familial and institutional factors indicates a discontinuity or lack of connectivity regarding support for Latina/o undocumented students.

In addition, while recent focus has been placed on understanding the group, Latina/o undocumented students remain an understudied population. As a result, they continue to be targets of misconceptions and stereotypes often resulting in exposure to ineffective educational, prevention, and intervention programs that are culturally insensitive.

The current exploratory study aimed to provide critical information that can inform future studies and that can be translated into effective, culturally appropriate programs and services for students and their families. Key stakeholders including high school personnel, outreach officers, policymakers, and politicians can be better informed how Latina/o undocumented students specifically, and Latina/o students in general, transition into postsecondary education. This study highlights experiences in the higher educational process that can be used to promote educational achievement among Latina/o undocumented students. In understanding how Latina/o undocumented students are influenced by key support systems, resources and information can be targeted to enhance their educational opportunities and promote higher levels of achievement.

Familial and Institutional Support and Influences

The results presented in this paper indicate that families play an instrumental role in facilitating and

motivating students to pursue higher education. However, as Olivérez (2006) reported, parents support their undocumented children pursuing higher education but do not know how nor have the resources to assist them appropriately. Whenever possible, college information shared with students must be shared with their families, especially siblings given the finding that students were encouraged to attend college if a sibling was attending or had attended a postsecondary institution. Institutions must take advantage of the strong familial network to further encourage college-going-- generally cohesive family units and extensive fictive kin networks (*i.e., compadrazgo*) that can be targeted with college knowledge. Further, encouraging the family and especially young children to share college knowledge will increase the social capital of the family unit as well as the larger familial network.

Unfortunately, the extent to which there is still a lack of general knowledge related to undocumented students among institutional agents at the high school and college levels, given the extensive research noting the importance of such information (Pérez, 2010a; Pérez, 2010b; Perez et al. 2009), is frustrating. Students in this sample who have made it to higher education are still not receiving or only receiving limited critical information. How can information be provided to undocumented Latina/o students that are most vulnerable? While students are eager for information, critical information and knowledge is not reaching this population widely and regularly.

The role of in-state tuition policies has been outlined in a distinctive study by Flores (2010) who explored whether in-state tuition policies increased college enrollment rates relative to institutions without such policies for undocumented Latina/o students. Using a national dataset, Flores (2010) found that in-state tuition policies increased the likelihood that undocumented Latina/o students would enroll in college. Indeed, compared to their peers in states without in-state tuition policies, undocumented Latina/o students were 1.54 times more likely to enroll in college given in-state tuition programs. However, this assumes that institutional agents have the proper information to share with their students. These statistics would be much more robust if more personnel were armed with college knowledge related to undocumented students.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The findings shared in this paper point to the need to develop policies and programs that take into account Latino students' cultural values and norms in order to more effectively address educational goals. Such programs should address heterogeneity among Latina/o populations and particularly among undocumented students and families. Credential, licensure, certificate and/or professional development programs for teachers and counselors must incorporate research and models on Latina/o populations into their curriculum and pedagogy. Given the findings reported in this paper and within the context of the existing literature on Latina/o undocumented students, we offer the following recommendations.

- Programs for students and families, that take into account Latino cultural values and norms, should be developed to promote familial knowledge, engagement, and involvement.
- Licensure and professional development programs should be developed for high school and community college counselors and teachers that include components that enhance knowledge and skills to better serve Latina/o undocumented students.
- The development of programs and mechanisms that increase the connectivity between families and institutions that promote consistency and continuity in the support provided by family members and institutional agents.

Policies and programs that incorporate these elements are more likely to promote greater educational access, opportunity, and success.

References

- Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Contreras, F. (2011). *Achieving equity for Latino students: Expanding the pathway to higher education through public policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Contreras, F. (2009). Sin papeles y rompiendo barreras: Latino students and the challenges of persisting in college. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 610-631.
- Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Croninger, R.G., & Lee, V.E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record*, 103(4), 548-581.
- Flores, S. (2010). State dream acts: The effect of in-state resident tuition policies and undocumented Latino students. *Review of Higher Education: Journal of the Association for the Study of Higher Education*, 239-283.
- Flores, S.M., & Horn, C.L. (2009). College persistence among undocumented students at a selective public university: A quantitative case study analysis. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 11(1), 57-76.
- Gándara, P., & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Maxwell, J.A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McDonough, P. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Olivérez, P.M. (2006). *Ready but restricted: An examination of the challenges of college access and financial aid for college-ready undocumented students in the U.S.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California.
- Oseguera, L., Flores, S.M., & Burciaga, E. (2010). Documenting implementation realities: Undocumented immigrant students in California and North Carolina. *Journal of College Admission*, 206, 37-43.
- Pérez, P.A. (2010b). The college choice process of Latina/o undocumented students: Implications for recruitment and retention. *Journal of College Admission*, 206, 21-25.
- Pérez, W. (2010a). High education access for undocumented students: Recommendations for counseling professionals. *Journal of College Admission*, 206, 32-35.
- Pérez, W., Espinoza, R., Ramos, K., Coronado, H., & Cortes, R. (2009). Academic resilience among undocumented Latino students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 31(2), 149-181.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and appliances in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.
- Putnam, R.D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78.
- Stanton-Salazar, R.D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 1-40.
- Stanton-Salazar, R.D., & Dornbusch, S.M. (1995). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68(2), 116-135.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Retrieved March 31, 2010 from <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>.
- Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.