

The author would like to acknowledge the 2007–2008 ENLACE Affiliates for their assistance with this research.

# College Choice Process of Latino Undocumented Students: Implications for Recruitment and Retention

## Introduction

In 2008, Latinos made up 20 percent of public school enrollments in the US and were the majority minority public school population in 22 states. Although the majority of Latino public school students are born in the US, 17 percent of Latino public school students are immigrants (Fry & Gonzales 2008). According to Pew Hispanic Center data, 7 percent of Latino children are undocumented immigrants (Fry & Passel 2009). In fact, a projected 65,000 undocumented students graduate yearly from US high schools (Olivérez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney 2006). Although some of these undocumented students have a desire to pursue higher education and are exceptional scholars, their legal status impedes their postsecondary goals (Olivérez et al. 2006). While many states fight to address the needs of this important population, legal challenges hinder their efforts (Perez Huber, Malagon, & Solorzano 2009). Because educating the Latino population is so important, examining the postsecondary plight of Latino undocumented students can assist all admission and outreach officers who work with such diverse populations.

## Why We Should Care

Across the US many states have established educational policies that provide financial aid support for small percentages of undocumented students to attend college at in-state tuition rates. One such state is California—home to the largest concentration of immigrants (Drachman 2006), where it is estimated that 2,600 to 3,000 undocumented students will attend college, since data tell us that approximately 5 percent to 10 percent of undocumented students who graduate with a high school diploma nationwide will attend some form of higher education (Gonzales 2007). Why should undergraduate college admission professionals and high school counselors care and what makes careful consideration of undocumented populations so important to any attempts to diversify the Latino college pipeline?

It is important to examine the college choice process of Latino undocumented students for a number of reasons, but the following five

are a starting point. First, the low educational achievement of Latino students in general continues to be deemed a “crisis” across all levels of the educational system (Gándara & Contreras 2009). Although undocumented students only make up a fraction of the general Latino population, uncovering strategies to assist first-generation, Latino undocumented students can sequentially supplement policies to aid their first-generation, US-born counterparts. Second, with a legal means to put their education to use, undocumented students would invest additional money in the US economy through spending and paying more in taxes (Gonzales 2007). Third, it has been well established that future job growth will require a college education (Moore, Shulock & Jensen 2009). Specifically, Moore, Shulock and Jensen (2009) note, “by 2025 there will be one million fewer college graduates than are needed in the workforce (p. 2). Indeed, undocumented students armed with degrees could potentially help fulfill this massive shortage. Fourth, most research supports that undocumented



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students are most likely to enroll in community colleges as their first postsecondary experience (Gonzales 2007), yet scholars have consistently asserted that community colleges “cool out” the aspirations of Latino and other students of color which makes transfer to a four-year college much less likely (Clark, 1959; Ornelas & Solorzano 2004). Finally, although the literature on undocumented students has grown, focusing specifically on their postsecondary experiences and college options will inspire more focused research that will ultimately improve practice.

This paper outlines the major influences on the college choice process of Latino undocumented students with a specific focus on the “choice” stage of the broader college opportunity process (Hossler & Gallagher 1987; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper 1999). As theorized by Hossler et. al (1987; 1999), the choice stage is where students make final decisions on postsecondary options from choice sets crafted during the “search” stage of college choice and analysis of the best place to attend given where they were admitted, wait-listed or denied acceptance. In other words, this paper focuses on *why* students decided to attend the respective postsecondary institution they selected. More importantly, the author offers findings from original qualitative research that highlight the voices of the students who participated in this inquiry in order to assist admission and counseling professionals in their effort to help undocumented students and their families navigate the college planning and decision-making process.

#### *California and AB 540*

In California, Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540) provides the opportunity for undocumented and documented students alike to pay in-state tuition prices if they a) graduate from a California high school or the equivalent; b) attend a California high school for at least three years; and c) have enrolled in or are currently attending an accredited postsecondary institution. If they are an undocumented student, in order to qualify for AB 540 status, in addition to the previous three criteria, the student must also ensure that they will file for legalization as soon as they are eligible. A handful of other states have similar policies although they vary in their criteria for eligibility (Flores & Chapa 2009; Frum 2007). Although AB 540 students may be eligible for in-state tuition costs, *undocumented* AB 540 students are not eligible for federal or state financial aid. Undoubtedly, these factors weigh heavily on their

college choice process and the amount of available financial aid quite often determines where an undocumented student begins their postsecondary journey.

#### *Influence of Financial Aid and Cost*

As noted earlier, undocumented or immigrant students are more likely to begin their postsecondary trajectories at a community college (Conway 2009). Conway (2009) attributes this preference to several factors including cost, the need for remediation and the absence of affirmative action programs which previously encouraged otherwise qualified students to apply to four-year universities. Because the majority of undocumented students do not qualify for federal or state financial aid the preference for the community college is no surprise (Gonzales 2007). In fact, as of 2006 only three states (Texas, Oklahoma and Utah) out of 10 with state resident tuition policies provided some form of state financial aid for undocumented students (Flores & Chapa 2009). Interestingly, there is a hesitancy to offer financial assistance because there is a concern that states which provide in-state tuition price policies, where undocumented students qualify, would attract additional immigrant students to that state—in turn overwhelming and burdening the educational system. According to Gonzales (2007), this has not happened and in fact quite the opposite has occurred—undocumented students have brought additional revenue to schools.

#### *Influence Of Socio-Environmental Factors*

Targeting the role of social and environmental factors on postsecondary academic success, Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009), reported that undocumented Latino students benefitted from supportive relationships with friends and parents as well as school engagement. Meanwhile, Olivérez (2006) also noted that parents were supportive of their undocumented children pursuing higher education but did not necessarily have the tools or resources to assist them.

Similar research on first-generation college students who are US-born but of a Latino ethnic background can also inform this study. Specifically, college choice research has demonstrated that families and relatives, peers and school personnel influence which postsecondary institutions students will attend. Which specific institution depends on the networks these constituencies have access to (Pérez & McDonough, 2008, Pérez 2007). Other research looking at Chicanas (Mexican-American women) reveals that parents were key in

encouraging their daughters to pursue higher education (Ceja 2007, 2001). Meanwhile, siblings and counselors served as sources with regard to college and financial aid information (Ceja 2007, 2001; Pérez 2007). Based on the previously noted research on undocumented students in higher education, you would expect parents, peers, school personnel and financial assistance to play an instrumental role in the Latino undocumented AB 540 college choice process.

### The Study

This study is guided by the following questions: 1) what are the barriers between undocumented students and four-year college attendance?; 2) are there strategies that can be implemented by counseling, admission and outreach practitioners that can help Latino undocumented students navigate the higher educational pipeline? By examining the experiences of Latino undocumented AB 540 students who have completed the college choice process, we can employ and enhance recruitment, retention and policy approaches to be more effective.

### Method and Analysis

This is a mixed method study that utilized qualitative interviews (in-depth, one-on-one interviews) and a quantitative questionnaire (demographic data) as primary data sources in order to provide a more holistic understanding of the Latino undocumented AB 540 college choice process that is not accessible from a large-scale quantitative study. The interview protocol and the analysis were both guided by a theoretical framework emphasizing social networks and the exchange of college information and resources (see Pérez & McDonough 2008). The total sample included 14 participants (seven men and seven women) half from a California, public community college and half from a California four-year public university (See Table 1). Additionally, all participants were: a) Latino; b) first-generation college students; c) from a low-SES family; and d) were all undocumented AB 540 students. All students were identified and recruited through a snowball sampling method. School sites were selected for their location within the state and for their reputation as being “AB 540-friendly” postsecondary institutions. Prior to analyzing the data, transcriptions were corrected for any mistakes then were coded and grouped by major themes and further analyzed across gender and institutional type. As a form of “member checking” participants were given the opportunity to review and revise findings (Maxwell 1996). This multi-pronged analysis led to the identification of the following three major influences on the Latino undocumented AB 540 college choice process: a) outreach as opportunity; b) cost/affordability; and c) college choice flowing through social support networks.

**Table 1: Latino Undocumented AB 540 College Choice Participants**

	Community College	University	Total
Female	4	3	7
Male	3	4	7
Both	7	7	14

### Findings

#### *Those Who Outreach Create Opportunity*

One influence noted by Latino undocumented students on their college choice process was opportunity. More concretely, students took into consideration cost and affordability, networks, as well as the fact that they were given the option to attend. For example, a community college student explained, “I simply chose to go to the college that was giving me the opportunity to attend.” In her particular situation a community college counselor had given a workshop at her high school and explained that undocumented students could file AB 540 affidavits and pay in-state tuition. It was the only postsecondary representative that had given her this option, and thus the only school that gave her the opportunity to attend any form of higher education at all.

Another sub-theme related to opportunity was the idea that students needed to seek out information in order to create opportunities for themselves. Although undocumented students may be hesitant due to their “situation,” as was commonly used to denote their legal status, participants repeatedly recommended that it was critical that their fellow undocumented students take the initiative and find contacts, information and resources to assist themselves in achieving their goals. It was imperative that they not remain “invisible” because the resources were not likely to come to them (Karlin 2007). At the same time, a university student added it was essential to “make the goal achievable.”

#### *Complications of Cost and Different Meanings of “Affordability”*

In-depth interviews revealed that the single most important factor involved in the college choice process when students in this sample selected an institution was cost. More specifically, participants revealed that they selected postsecondary institutions that were affordable, “the cheapest” or as a university student noted were based on what was, “closer, cheaper, and convenient.” As a result, students selected community colleges and the transfer option as their preferred route of obtaining a bachelor’s degree.

As alluded to by the previous student, location and distance of the institution from home and work also factored into the importance of cost and affordability. That is, because undocumented students in this sample were ineligible to obtain a driver’s license, they were dependent on public transportation in order to get to school. Students reported selecting postsecondary institutions that required as little travel and transferring from one bus to another to save money on bus fare. Although participants may have had more than one college option near them, the student selected the college that only required them to take one bus and did not require transfer fare. The significance of choosing a college based on cost and proximity to home is consistent with research by Santiago (2007) who reviewed factors influencing the college decision-making process for Latino students.

Some students did not even apply to institutions where they were not confident they would be accepted to save money on application



Familial, peer and school networks also played an important role in the selection of a postsecondary institution for Latino undocumented students. Participants remarked that they had older siblings who attended the schools they were currently attending and this was significant in their selection.

fees. Finally, it was disturbing to find that in one case a high school counselor discouraged undocumented students from applying to four-year institutions at all because of tuition costs. In this instance, not only were they discouraged from attending a four-year school, all undocumented students were steered away from four-year universities by limiting information to community colleges.

#### *College Choice Travels Through Social Support Networks*

Familial, peer and school networks also played an important role in the selection of a postsecondary institution for Latino undocumented students. Participants remarked that they had older siblings who attended the schools they were currently attending and this was significant in their selection. 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.

Similar to a previous study examining the college choice process of US-born Latino students, data revealed that just like familial contacts, peer networks also played critical influences (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Specifically, students followed older friends who were already attending a particular college or decided to go along with a friend to their respective postsecondary institution. In one case a student did not decide to pursue higher education until his friend informed him he was going to attend. As a result, he decided he would also pursue higher education at the same institution. In another instance, a student had immigrated with another student from México and they pursued the same secondary and postsecondary path. Finally, students noted that the Latino faculty, staff and student diversity on their campus of choice and their familiarity with staff also made the institutions attractive.

#### **Implications**

##### *Strategies for Recruitment and Retention*

It is clear that outreach efforts must be enhanced in order to increase opportunities for undocumented students to attend postsecondary institutions. Like other students who receive information about various colleges, undocumented students should be given multiple options with regard to higher education at-

tendance. Information should not be limited to community college information merely because they cost less than four-year institutions.

Cost and affordability were also major factors that influenced the participants in this sample because of their ineligibility for federal and state financial aid. However, if private scholarships or foundation funding could be generated or channeled that did not require citizenship status, institutions would attract additional students in general and undocumented students in particular. It would behoove development officers to approach their funders and donors and inquire whether citizenship status is a necessary criterion to be eligible for the scholarships they are funding. The few students who were able to obtain scholarships in the study remarked that only with such monies were they able to afford food and shelter, without sacrificing tuition funding, or their full-time status. In other instances where participants were not able to obtain scholarships, they had to attend school part-time, work more hours (detracting from academics), and/or prolong their time-to-degree. Furthermore, it is vital that we enhance our understanding of cost and affordability and recognize that there are other school-related expenses outside of tuition such as application fees and bus/transfer fare (McDonough & Calderone 2006). Such costs should be considered when creating scholarships for students and should be flexible enough to be utilized for any school-related expenses.

Finally, familial, peer and school networks were instrumental in the Latino undocumented college choice process. Previous research has suggested that targeting families with college information, given the important influence of the primary family in the college choice process, may be a good option in facilitating more Latino students through the educational pipeline (Pérez & McDonough 2008; Pérez 2007). However, select undocumented students share unique circumstances which their parents may not be present and instead live in their country of origin. In such cases, the previous strategy would not work. Under these conditions it would be best to focus on peer groups and networks that share a similar influence. In this manner students could purposefully share information and recruit their peers through informal knowledge-sharing or more formal peer-mentoring programs.

Participants also noted knowing school personnel at their respective schools encouraged them to attend that particular college. Cross-training school personnel would be an effective strategy to increase the



recruitment of undocumented students as well as augment retention. For example, noting the confusing tax and financial aid forms, Olivas (2009) suggests appointing a staff member in the financial aid and admission office to work directly with undocumented students and parents. Additional training and specific point persons for this essential information would prove invaluable. In addition, increased communication across programs and departments would enhance the knowledge base of all faculty and staff and in turn support undocumented students.

### Student Recommendations

Participants shared various suggestions to assist their fellow undocumented students through the college choice process. Interestingly, they mirrored themes noted previously as major factors influencing the planning and decision-making process. First, participants encouraged their undocumented peers to seek out postsecondary student affairs professionals and faculty who they were comfortable with for guidance and assistance. They also suggested turning to peers for support and to find former or current students at their prospective postsecondary institutions to inquire about resources. Next, participants advocated that their peers take initiative and search out scholarship and college information early in high school. Students also suggested that financial assistance information be made available in junior high school or ninth grade and that high schools and postsecondary institutions need to communicate better regarding financial options for undocumented students. Finally, students advised that their fellow undocumented students not use

“their situation” as an excuse to hinder their postsecondary plans and to apply for any and all scholarships for which they are eligible.

### Conclusion

Recognizing opportunity, cost and affordability, and networks as key influences on the Latino undocumented college choice process is the first step in assisting these students. Enhancing services and resources that address these critical factors is the next step. Through such augmenting, not only will the recruitment and retention of undocumented students improve, it is the author's contention that other first-generation college students will also benefit. That said, the final step to fully support undocumented students will be to implement policy that will make it possible to put their efforts and degrees to good work.



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