

Socially Influenced Decision-Making and Latino College Student Experiences in the United States: Introduction to the Issue

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Access to college is a complex process that involves the interaction between multiple social forces. The authors argue for a more nuanced exploration into how and why Latina/o student groups' experience barriers related to college access. Further, they call for further action-oriented research that addresses the process of removing barriers.

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This issue represents the second part of a two-part issue on Latino college student experiences in the United States. As in the first issue, the goal of our work is to understand how Latino students traverse their college choices as individuals and as Latinos. As we noted in the first issue:

We come to this topic with a sense of urgency. While only 12% of college-aged students were Latino in 2010, the US Census Bureau is predicting a doubling of the student population in the next ten years (Liu, 2011). By 2020, 1 in 4 traditionally college-aged adults will be Latino (Liu, 2011). These predictions do not include the increasing number of non-traditionally college-aged Latino students who return to postsecondary education after the age of 25. Much attention has been given to access as well as considering Latinos as a unified group. In a postmodern world that involves the

intersection of multiple identities, we take a more nuanced approach to looking at the experiences of Latino students (Venegas & Hallett, 2013, p. 68).

The first issue of the journal was organized to address the following question: How are different Latino subpopulations served within postsecondary education? To address that question, an engaged group of scholars presented research concerning Latino student experiences related to socioeconomic status (Espinoza, 2013), connection in the college environment (Moreno & Banuelos, 2013), immigration status (Hallett, 2013), and parental involvement (Castellanos et al., 2013). The interactions of Latino college students with these differing personal and social contexts impacted the kinds of resources and experiences available. These connections served as starting points to understand the Latino college student experience and are further extended by the authors in this issue.

The collection of articles in this issue highlight the specific perspectives of Latino men, children from military families, the phenomenon of undermatch, and finally, the broad concept of social trust for Latinos in the United States. We consider the ways Latino college students make decisions about their college plans based upon the access they have to available information and how it fits within their

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understandings of the world. The education research community has been seeking to engage in analysis of this type of decision-making for a long time as a means to identify barriers and opportunities. If we draw on the “cultural wealth” theories that are popular right now, we would say that information is passing on from one group to another. Certainly, the social and cultural closeness that is considered part of the Latino community can be considered a strength. In the case of the work of Santos, Esqueda, and Molina in this issue, the connection of military families adds another layer of cohesiveness. But what does a student do when that information is “wrong” or incomplete, that is, when the information given is not the best possible information? Rodriguez’s paper on undermatch and Huerta’s paper on Latino men and college choice certainly attest to the consequences of “bad information.” Of course, no one is alleging that peers, counselors, parents or others intentionally deceive or harm students. However, not all advice provides appropriate guidance for young people pursuing a four-year degree. McDonough, Calderone, and Venegas paper on social trust is an attempt to work through the complex web of trust, social trust, and what it might mean for Latino students and their families.

Each of these papers reinforces the importance of viewing college access for Latino students in the US from a multilayered contextual approach. Latinos in the US are not a monolithic group with various cultural practices and social norms. However, the papers presented in this and so much other research on Latinos does find some common themes—families are important and a collective sense of culture is important. Latinos in the US do not make college-going decisions based solely on individualistic concerns. Santos et al.’s focus on the collectivism of military students makes a strong statement in that direction. Relatedly, Huerta’s work highlights the value of being able to support oneself and one’s family. McDonough et al.’s work emphasizes the role of society in trusting college-going as a pathway for economic support. Rodriguez’s paper highlights the reticence some Latino students may feel toward taking big risks in their

educational choices. Of course, we readily admit that these issues are not exclusively “Latino” but we agree that these themes frame many of the educational decisions made that influence college-going for this community.

While the two-part special issue continues a more nuanced discussion of how multifaceted identities of Latinos frame college access, more work is warranted. College-going—particularly for underserved students—involves the intersection of many social issues ranging from income disparity and racism to immigration reform and military service. The legacy of exclusionary educational policies and practices that led to significant inequity in terms of college access will require intentional and long-term effort to overcome. Complex issues, such as social trust, may take generations to repair. And these issues involve a nuanced consideration of issues in conjunction with race. We encourage future researchers to continue exploring how the intersection of identities frame college-going for Latino students, including issues related to religion, LGBTQ, rural communities, and nontraditional college students.

For research findings to be useful, additional theorizing is needed to create a framework for educational leaders and policymakers that demonstrates how policies can be created that move away from focusing on a singular aspect of identity. As the authors in both special issues demonstrate, Latino students have complex identities that involve more than race or ethnicity. Policies and programs that simply consider race or ethnicity as singular descriptors will eventually fail. Given the complexity of designing policies with nuanced understandings of the multilayered aspects of social life, policymakers need guidance. Although theories like intersectionality, community cultural wealth, and social capital help point out the problems with social policy, the next step is to craft a theory that could frame how policymakers could address these issues.

As social activists, we also strongly encourage action-oriented research that involves moving beyond identifying social issues and

moves toward understanding the process of resolving them. The Action Inquiry Model (AIM) proposed by Edward St. John (2013) provides a useful framework for engaging in social justice oriented research that involves researchers working with community partners to identify issues, design pilot studies designed to resolve the problem, and carefully analyze data to create actionable knowledge. These forms of action-oriented research have the potential to move findings into policy and practice as well as partnering with community organizations to understand challenges to the implementation of those findings. By engaging in this type of work, researchers could assist in improving college access opportunities locally and nationally.

As we reflect on our work with *JOLLAS* in developing these special issues, we believe that we have made progress in meeting our two operational goals. First, we are pleased and grateful to have worked with this group of emerging and seasoned scholars, who represent differing institutional affiliations, to showcase their scholarship related to the Latino community and college-going from a variety of perspectives. Second, we are pleased with our decision to partner with *JOLLAS* as a mainly online publication. Based on the feedback we have received from the first volume of the special issue, we have broadened the reach of our work to an audience that is more

international and online. As always, we are grateful to the many scholars who have contributed to this work and appreciate the guidance of our *JOLLAS* editor, Carey Ryan throughout this academic endeavor.

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