

# Latinx Community College Students on Academic Probation: Struggles and Success

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*Latinx undergraduate students on academic probation after their first semester of community college risk further course failure and dropping out. As the largest minority on college campuses, it is important to understand Latinx college students' experiences with academic probation during freshman year to develop strategies that can support them in the community college context. Using Schlossberg's and Tinto's transition theories, we explored nine Latinx community college students' perceptions after being placed on academic probation during freshman year. Findings indicate that challenges managing employment, coursework, family obligations, and academic and social integration, as well as difficulties navigating the college system, contributed to academic probationary status. Furthermore, these participants developed significant emotional stress, transformational experiences, and new behaviors due to academic probation.*

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## Introduction

Latinx students are often subject to stressors associated with a lack of academic preparation and resources to support them through college; this is a common challenge in higher education among underserved students (Altbach et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2014). At community colleges, 60% of incoming first-year students are required to enroll in remedial courses that do not count as degree-earning credits, and less than 20% of those enrolled in one remedial course graduate within five years (Chen et al., 2020). Community colleges are open access institutions that offer academic and vocational options for students who opt to stay close to home for college due to familial or economic obligations. This is true of many Latinx college students who lag behind their White peers in degree completion. Approximately 45.8% of Latinx college students in the United States earned

a 2- or 4-year degree within six years, a lower completion rate than their White peers (62%) and a higher completion rate than their Black peers (38%; *Excelencia in Education*, 2020). Community colleges are a point of entry to higher education for minority students. Studies such as this one that elucidate successful Latinx students' experiences in overcoming barriers during academic probation at the community college are useful to develop support practices among academic and student affairs programs that serve Latinx students.

Family obligations often compel Latinx students to attend institutions that offer flexibility in coursework (Altbach et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2014). For Latinx students working to support themselves and their families, time is a significant barrier to their educational goals. Moreover, many are not ready to transition to college-level coursework, and remedial coursework may lessen their chances of completing college (Bailey, 2017; Jenkins, 2014).

Past research suggests that Latinx college students are more likely to experience academic difficulties and consequently have a higher college dropout rate than their White peers (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015; Gándara et al., 2012; Tovar, 2015). The academic gap continues to widen for Latinx students, many of whom are placed on academic probation (AP) due to multiple risk factors that can affect their academic performance. These risk factors include first-generation status, employment, family obligations, not knowing how to navigate probationary status, and being underprepared for college coursework (Arcand & Leblanc, 2011; Houle, 2013; Tovar, 2015; Vehabovic, 2015). AP is used in higher education to support an increase in student grades over a semester, and it is often linked to individualized support, though that is not always the case (Arcand, 2013; Houle, 2013). A significant number of students on AP do not reach a satisfactory level of academic performance during the allotted time, placing them in danger of dismissal. Student attrition is a critical issue in higher education, especially among Latinx students who have access to college but are often not retained by their institutions (*Excelencia in Education*, 2018).

This qualitative case study investigated the AP experiences of Latinx undergraduate students at one community college; specifically, we examined the strategies participants used to transition from probationary status to good academic standing. AP can occur at any time in a college student's academic journey, though it more often occurs when students are transitioning from high school to college or after a prolonged gap in education. Houle (2013) reported that approximately 25% of students are dismissed from higher-education institutions for not achieving timely and satisfactory academic standing.

Understanding how Latinx students manage their probationary periods and transition to good academic standing is imperative for community colleges, which enroll 52% of Latinx U.S. undergraduates and lose 42% of those students within three years of enrollment (Excelencia in Education, 2020). Latinx student access to college does not guarantee successful academic outcomes, especially at open access institutions like community colleges. Many Latinx students who sign up for college are not academically prepared and possess personal mitigating circumstances; these are risk factors for academic probation (Tierney & Sablan, 2014; Tinto, 1975; Tovar, 2015). Data also indicates that 60% of community college students lack preparation for college-level coursework (Chen, 2019). This demonstrates that access to college does not guarantee successful completion of college.

While Latinx students may not be academically prepared for college, past research shows that academic persistence can act as a motivator in the degree attainment process (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Price & Tovar, 2014; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Moreover, though academic support and intervention programs can teach and reinforce essential skills that help some students succeed, others continue to struggle (Renzulli, 2015; Seirup & Rose, 2011). Yeager and Dweck (2012) found that students could change their mindsets and develop strategies to improve resilience in any area they desired. While studies have demonstrated how students on AP adopt attitudes that guide them to persist in college, few studies elucidate the experiences of Latinx students on AP.

### Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and Tinto's departure theory (1975) inform this study as they relate to students'

transitional experiences and the challenges they encounter while navigating their college experiences. First-generation students, military veterans, returning adults, and adults enrolling in college for the first time all represent categories of students in transition whose needs vary. They may lack understanding of the academic policies associated with satisfactory academic progress, knowledge of how to develop and navigate college support systems, the ability to identify academic advisors, or access to support services in the college context. Some may need to focus on time management skills to meet academic requirements, while others may face challenges that impede their transition, including poor health, unemployment, or enrollment in remedial courses (Anderson et al., 2012; DeVilbiss, 2014; Tovar & Simon, 2006).

A freshman student attending college is expected to transition successfully, and being placed on AP by the end of the first quarter or semester is often unexpected. This stressful situation requires a transition in the form of a reaction or a change in behavior. The transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) also described the resources advisors might use to support students in developing coping mechanisms to help them complete their education. For new students, especially underprepared minority students, connections with campus academic resources and family support are essential components in academic success (Tovar, 2015). A student's academic skills, motivational factors, family support, and socioeconomic status all have an important role in achieving academic success (Hoover, 2014; Tinto, 1993). If students adapt to and integrate into their campus communities, these personal characteristics can support their persistence and commitment towards degree completion and demonstrate the value of student engagement on campuses (Hoover, 2014; Price & Tovar, 2014; Tinto, 1993). Studies show that academic support in college students' experiences, including relationships with their family, friends, and faculty members, are all essential for their academic and social progress (Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012; Tovar, 2015; Wark, 2015; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Many institutions of higher education support their students by improving programs and services or by creating new institutional policies that address these issues. However, these institutions still have difficulty retaining students who are underprepared. Students may feel that college life is too intimidating and their academic challenges and consequent low grades may result in dismissal (McGrath & Burd, 2012). Tinto (1993) referred to

**Table 1.** Participant demographics of the sample ( $N = 9$ )

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Work Status	College Level	Marital Status	Household Income
Angel	20-25	M	Mexican	Part-time	Second year	Single	0-10,000
Pedro	20-25	M	Latinx	Part-time	Second year	Single	0-10,000
Cecilia	25-30	F	Mexican	Part-time	Second year	Single	10,000-20,000
Gustavo	20-25	M	Mexican	Full-time	Second year	Single	30,000- 40,000
Antonio	20-25	M	Mexican	Part-time	Second year	Single	20,000-30,000
Roberto	>30	M	Latinx	Unemployed	Second year	Single	0-10,000
Mariana	20-25	F	Mexican	Part-time	Second year	Single	20,000-30,000
Maria	20	F	Mexican	Full-time	Second year	Single	10,000-20,000
Gisela	25-30	F	Mexican	Full-time	Second year	Single	30,000-40,000

*Note.* Latinx participants were from Latin America and South America. The word “Mexican” is used for individuals who are from Mexico.

this process as an involuntary departure or drop-out decision, meaning that the student’s circumstances contributed to their departure. This case study explores the experiences of Latinx students on AP and their transitions to satisfactory academic standing in order to develop student-centered support practices that positively impact retention.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to understand the experiences of Latinx students on academic probation. Past theoretical literature on college academic retention established that readiness to learn, ability to navigate the college system, consistent enrollment, and relationships with peers, faculty members, and staff members are essential for students to succeed (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975). However, first-year students need time to develop a knowledge base of college norms, policies, and behaviors, as well as to cultivate relationships that positively affect their transition to and enrollment in college. Accordingly, the following four questions guided this study:

- RQ1.** How do Latinx community college students describe their experiences with academic probation?
- RQ2.** What experiences led Latinx students to acquire an academic probation status?
- RQ3.** What factors do Latinx students attribute to their transition into satisfactory academic standing?
- RQ4.** What happens to Latinx students after they transition from academic proba-

tion status? What lessons do they learn from the experience?

**Participants and Research Site**

Using purposeful and snowball sampling, nine Latinx college students from one community college in the Pacific Northwest were recruited to participate in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The participants consisted of four women and five men with ages ranging between 20 to 33 (see Table 1 for full participant demographics). Each participant successfully achieved satisfactory academic standing after having previously been on AP. At the time of data collection for this study, the participants were in their second year of college. Each student was given a pseudonym to protect their identity. The research site was selected because it represents a community college with a small population of 250 Latinx students, a little more than half of which were placed on AP during their first year at the college. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board and the research site’s approval, we collaborated with the research site’s student affairs office for outreach to send a recruitment flyer to 132 potential participants. Those interested were instructed to contact the researchers by phone or email. They were then screened to assess whether they met the study’s criteria. Some participants informed their peers about the study; thus, a few participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Most participants had undeclared majors, were born in the United States to immigrant parents from Mexico, spoke Spanish at home, and were first-generation college students. All participants had been placed

on academic probation during their first semester of college yet managed to successfully transition to satisfactory academic standing.

### Research Design

This qualitative case study investigated student experiences within a bound system: a two-year community college in the Northwest United States (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). Since qualitative research provides a holistic and flexible approach to studying phenomena, it was utilized here to provide an in-depth and insightful investigation of people involved in a specific context (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Data collection included a demographic survey to collect descriptive information and confirm that participants met the criteria to participate in the study (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2017). We also used in-depth interviews to have participants share their experiences with poor academic standing and the strategies they used to mitigate AP and transition into satisfactory academic standing. The interviews took place on campus in a private room designated for this purpose; each participant signed a consent form and filled out a demographic survey prior to the interview. Interview questions were used to guide discussions on academic probation. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were digitally recorded, and were transcribed shortly after the interview. The final method of data collection was artifact review. Document artifacts, which were collected both on campus and online, focused on information related to student support services, AP, and institutional reports and were used to inform the study (Yin, 2014).

### Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis took approximately four months, during which time we interviewed each participant, transcribed interviews, organized data collection, and read the participants' narratives. Once an interview was transcribed, it was analyzed using layers of coding and the constant comparison technique to reduce data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldaña, 2016). Because coding is a cyclical activity, we made notes on each transcription multiple times through the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). As defined by Saldaña (2016), exploratory coding allows researchers to review interview transcriptions for words, phrases, and ideas that participants repeat during interviews. Using this process, we discovered codes with an open mind. Some participants repeatedly used

words and phrases to describe their academic probation period, such as, "very challenging," "terrible stress," "I did not have help," and "work." Transcriptions and artifacts were analyzed in a layered process which brought several categories of data to the forefront and facilitated organization of ideas. After the initial exploratory coding process, affective and in vivo coding added depth to the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Using affective coding, we developed codes and phrases such as "sadness," "depression," and "stress," that reflected the depth of emotion in students' experiences.

The in vivo coding method helped us analyze and stay true to participants' descriptions of their experiences (Saldaña, 2016). Some of the phrases that captured the essence of participants' experiences during the in vivo coding process were, "I am proud of myself, where I am now," "I felt pressure," and "He always tells me not to give up, told me to move forward." Throughout the analysis we used the constant comparison method to unitize the experiences participants described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We identified similar concepts that we grouped into patterns and then themes; this process helped us understand participants' experiences with AP. Examining interview transcriptions, institutional reports, website content, and student support services documents during the analysis further supported the descriptions we developed of Latinx community college students with AP.

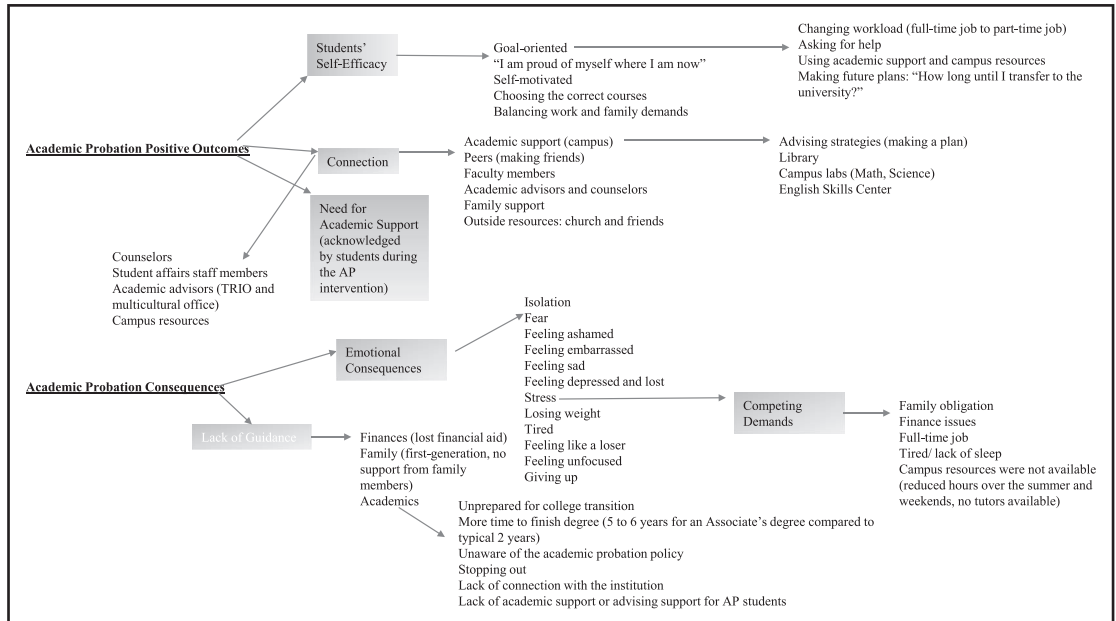
### Findings

Latinx students' experiences with AP were documented through the data collection and analysis process. We grouped similar concepts into themes that are represented in this section. Identifying similar concepts across participants' data made it easier to build the categories that defined the themes for this study. These themes were: (a) factors leading to AP; (b) emotional consequences of AP; (c) interpersonal significance of AP; (d) successful experiences as a result of AP; and (e) development of new behaviors. Each theme will be discussed in this section. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of our participants (see Figure 1).

### Factors Leading to AP

There were several factors and stressors that contributed to Latinx students' poor academic performance. Many participants used similar words to describe their transition to college,

Figure 1.



including “very challenging,” “hard,” and “stressful.” Participants felt that they were not prepared for the transition to college; many experienced problems integrating into the college environment. Some had delayed entry to college because they were employed full-time to help their parents, which made their transitions more challenging because they lost momentum. One female participant shared that she felt lost when she returned to college, stating, “College was a fast pace, and I got used to the high school where I had guidance.” Another participant struggled to find time to access support services:

I knew about the academic support, but I did not have time to use [it] because of my work. I did not have a way to use any support services. I sent emails to instructors and asked for more time for my homework. I asked for help.

Eight of the nine participants worked full-time during their AP to financially support their families, while the ninth was employed part-time. Most participants struggled to integrate both socially and academically to the college environment. Cecilia explained that her academic struggles began during her first course in college as she was transitioning to the higher education

context. First semester experiences were challenging for her as she was employed part-time and pressed for time. Cecilia found it difficult to navigate multiple obligations while acclimating to the new demands of college. She also struggled navigating the college system, was not aware of new student orientation, and had limited information about the college and expectations. Cecilia did not ask for help; she knew she needed support but was unsure about how to obtain it. She was unaware of the college’s academic probation policy. By the end of her first quarter, when she realized that she was on AP, she was disillusioned and decided to drop out. She abandoned her studies and began full-time employment. Eventually, she returned and successfully transitioned from AP. Another student, Mariana described personal circumstances that impacted her first semester at college:

I had family issues, three sisters that I needed to take care of and lots of homework. My father was deported, and I needed to take care of my family. I needed to bathe them [younger siblings], prepar[e] food and I needed to try to do my homework. My mother worked, and I also needed to work part time over the weekend and help my sisters at home. I did not have time. In high

school, I had a teacher that [told] me what to do, but college does not work this way.

Some of the sub-themes of the factors that impacted Latinx student academic performance and contributed to their being placed on AP included financial difficulties, lack of family support in their educational endeavors, having to care for younger or older relatives, reluctance to seek help, full-time employment, lack of knowledge of support services, unpreparedness for college, lack of guidance, and student self-advicing.

### **Emotional Consequences of AP**

Latinx college students described experiencing shame, confusion, and sadness at having been placed on academic probation. The data demonstrated how AP had an isolating and humiliating impact on participants. Cecilia stated:

Nobody helped me with the AP. The college email was sent to me, and I felt so embarrassed about my AP, I did not want to talk about it anymore. I thought I was good, but I was not. I felt pressure, [it was] overwhelming.

Male participants especially felt humiliated by AP placement. During interviews they discussed the sociocultural value of independence, believing that seeking out help suggested a weakness on their part. The idea of independence was ingrained in them from a young age as something to be valued. To these men, asking for help was a sign of fragility. The idea of being judged or feeling like a loser was deep-rooted in several of these participants. However, after being placed on AP, they realized the importance of working through these stigmas and sought advisor and tutor support. Gustavo confirmed the following:

I lost 10 pounds because of the stress I had. The multicultural office staff helped me a lot. I looked for Harold to help me. He is like a brother for me; he is Latinx. He spends time with me. He helps me with my homework. He told me not to worry about things. He always tells me not to give up, told me to move forward.

Another participant, Cecilia, stated:

I did not ask for help, the only thing I knew... I needed to work more to support my family. I did not know about the academic probation policy, I was pregnant, and it was very overwhelming this situation, and I decided to give up on school.

These accounts demonstrate the emotional toll AP may have on college students. The literature on freshman college integration shows that this is a period of significant changes and challenges for students, impacting their cognitive, emotional, and social development (DeVilbiss, 2014; Tinto, 1975; Tovar, 2015; Wark, 2015). To address transitional challenges, some colleges provide workshops on strategies to support the new responsibilities of college coursework and services to help first-year students alleviate these types of stressors (Garett et al., 2017).

Preparing first-year students for the challenges of college and supporting their development of coping mechanisms to navigate these challenges are essential skills academic and student affairs professionals should understand. If a student self-advises, the stress of identifying courses to fit into their future careers could cause their grades to drop, especially if they make poor decisions in pairing several difficult courses simultaneously. The changes students experience as they transition to college and throughout their college journeys may challenge long-held familial and cultural ideas, which can be emotionally taxing.

Participants in this study expressed having experienced disappointment and consternation at being placed on probation. Most kept their academic failure hidden from family and friends due to embarrassment. As first-generation college students, these students' families were counting on them to succeed. Some participants dropped out of college due to stress but later returned to complete their degrees. Participants expressed feeling academically deficient during their AP, which played a negative role during that period of their lives. It brought doubt and uncertainty to them, causing a loss of self-confidence in their ability to complete college coursework. Almost all the participants asserted that they wished the institution would have approached them before placing them on AP. Many found out they were on AP when they were blocked from registering for next semester courses. In most cases, participants stated that they had limited information about the academic performance policy, an

experience shared by students at other colleges (Barouch-Gilbert, 2015).

### **Interpersonal Significance of AP**

Latinx college students describe their AP experiences as personally significant, as being on AP forced them to think about their own behaviors, attitudes, and self-advocacy. For some, being on AP changed the course of their academic journey. Whereas prior to AP these students may have been passive in seeking academic support, after AP many became self-advocates who sought out student support resources and developed networks on campus to support their academic progress. Participants learned to develop social capital and leveraged those types of supports and linkages to transition to satisfactory academic standing. When asked about transitioning to satisfactory academic standing, Maria shared, “[I] use academic and emotional resources [on campus]. I am grateful for what I am, I wish I could have this mindset before [AP]. Now, I know what is going to cost to me to reach my goal.” Pedro stated:

I try to stay on focus. I use all the school resources, and now, I am communicating [with faculty and staff members] more than before. [I] go and talk to teachers and support services about my needs. Another important thing is doing my homework on time. I just had Kirsten [multicultural office staff member] help me. Nobody before helped me . . . I needed to figure out things by myself.

Most participants did not inform their parents that they were on AP. Some used financial stress as an excuse if they decided to stop out, or they told their families they would work for a year to help the family and then return. The decision to stop out was personal, not forced, as the AP policy did not require a pause in enrollment but was designed to act as a warning for students to improve their academic performance. One participant, Antonio, told us that he was afraid to tell his parents that he was on AP because of shame; they were counting on him as the first in his family to attend college. He overcame his shame and admitted the truth to them: “After some time, I told them. I got surprised how they encouraged and motivated me to do better.” This quote demonstrates the embarrassment this experience

causes among some students and the concern associated in disappointing family. For Latinx families, having their children in college, especially if they are first-generation, signals progress and future financial security. Participants were aware of the social and economic mobility opportunities linked to a college degree (Chetty et al., 2017).

### **Successful Experiences as a Result of AP**

During the interviews, participants described their own personal development and the lessons they learned during their AP periods. Many reflected upon their personal values while they were on AP, their own expectations to succeed, and how transformative the probationary status period was. Participants changed their behaviors, acknowledged their role in being placed on AP, and described how they worked at improving their time management skills, study habits, and resourcefulness. They leveraged networks, formed peer relationships, and learned how to access information that was relevant to their academic needs. Roberto said, “It is important to have a friend in the classroom because you always can count [on] them to help in case you need to miss the class.” Mariana stated that she began to use the multicultural service’s academic support during her AP period: “I used the multicultural department, and once a week I met with the advisor, which worked directly with me. Every week, he advised me and wanted to confirm my goals. He helped me a lot.” Accessing targeted advising was meaningful to these students. They felt comfortable visiting the multicultural office on campus, and some students developed mentoring relationships with their advisors. Most of the participants changed their majors to more flexible and affordable programs that better accommodated their work schedules.

### **Development of New Behaviors**

Some of the participants decided to stop out of college because of the shame and frustration of being placed on academic probation, though doing so was not required. In their decision to return, they knew some of their behaviors had to change or they would be academically dismissed per the college probation policy. All participants were able to identify factors that contributed to their AP and purposely develop new habits to help them succeed. While participants often suggested that their feelings about being on AP were negative, the emotions they articulated

pointed to positive behavioral changes over time. Antonio stated:

I learned to find friends that are better academically than me, [which] is great. My friend got 'A's and helped me during the quarter. Now, I try to avoid distractions. I think electronics can help us to study but also, I cannot study with my cellphone close to me.

With peer support, Antonio improved his time management skills, became aware of distractors, and was able to improve his grades. Participants discussed the modifications they had to make to their own actions and how they perceived these changes as related to their academic performance. Some of these changes included transitioning to part-time course loads, changing majors, asking family for more support, and working towards increasing their self-efficacy skills.

### **Discussion and Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education**

Findings from this study can aid higher education institutions that enroll Latinx students, especially in the community college context. Academic and student affairs professionals should note that Latinx students possess unique needs and characteristics that impact their academic performance. These include family commitments, personal and cultural values, challenges to academic integration, and employment obligations (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Tinto, 1993). College advisors and support personnel can better serve their Latinx students if they acknowledge these characteristics and develop targeted support services during the initial transition to college and throughout the Latinx student enrollment experience (DeVilbiss, 2014). The transition theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and the departure theory (Tinto, 1975) are both relevant to the findings of this study, which demonstrate the critical role of student engagement at each intersection of the college experience. This is especially true of Latinx students, who generally come from under-resourced school districts, are often academically and socially unprepared for college, and may struggle to navigate college in conjunction with family and employment responsibilities (Delgado Gaitan, 2012). Moreover, many Latinx students take on college with little help from adults who understand how to navigate the U.S. higher education system. Colleges must

consider this factor when designing programs to recruit and retain Latinx students. Providing early access points to connections and resources that support their academic and social skill development may sustain Latinx students to degree completion (DeVilbiss, 2014; Schlossberg et al., 1995; Tinto, 1993). The following are recommendations for academic and student affairs professionals to better support Latinx students.

### **Bridge Admissions, Enrollment, and Advising**

Develop a bridge between admissions, enrollment, and advising to create a seamless transition in services for new and returning Latinx students. Partnerships between service units and academic affairs offices connect students with individuals who can direct them to resources, information, and periodic check-ins during their first year at college. When students identify and connect with individuals and resources that guide them toward resolving issues that hinder their progress, they are inclined to stay connected to those resources and thus have a better chance of succeeding in attaining their educational goals. This is especially true of Latinx students who are relationally oriented (Delgado Gaitan, 2012). One onboarding strategy is to develop student success portals where students can access pertinent contacts, links to services, digital appointment scheduling for tutors, support staff members' virtual offices, job boards, events calendars, past workshop recordings, and other important information. This creates a tangible virtual space where new students can quickly access resources to support them.

### **Early Intervention**

A crucial area for improvement in student retention is the systematic tracking of those who are in danger of failing courses or who demonstrate at-risk behaviors before placement in AP. Intervention for these students can be accomplished using early alert systems to trigger support. Collaboration between faculty members and advisors, as well as student support interventions like study groups, peer mentorship, and study workshops, can be used to support students on their academic trajectories (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015; Parnell et al., 2018; Stern, 2014). Ensuring there is a referral program that faculty members can access for student academic coaching and tutoring is one item that should be on every student affairs checklist.

Early links to support and mentors could have helped this study's participants develop action



plans to work through their struggles when they were in danger of failure. Access to people, resources, and networks early on makes a difference to students in danger of failing a course. When participants in this study developed relationships with advisors, they were able to work through their struggles and they felt alleviated from some of the stress and emotional consequences of AP.

### **Develop a Peer Mentoring Program**

One strategy to support Latinx students is to implement peer mentoring programs that match Latinx students with more experienced peers to provide support during their initial college enrollment. This can be developed through the student affairs office. This strategy links Latinx students to individuals who are not intimidating because they are peers. Peers can be available via text, phone, and email to answer questions or link students to helpful campus resources or other peers on campus. Connecting freshmen Latinx students to peers to support them through their first semester increases their chances to succeed in the college transition process (Moschetti et al., 2018). Relationships with experienced peers help Latinx students develop social capital that is invaluable in navigating new educational environments. Latinx students have described peer mentors as caring and respectful individuals who provide college modeling behaviors, support, and direction in a new environment (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Mentoring programs work because, in addition to providing emotional and strategic social and academic support, they can help demonstrate to students that they are not so dissimilar from their peers and that they can succeed in college (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

Another strategy colleges use to support student success is to have faculty members collaborate with student advisors, which promotes student/faculty member relationships, direct support for students, information sharing, and access to decision-makers in the college context (Allard & Parashar, 2013). When faculty members are involved in freshmen orientation and academic skills courses, students can form connections with them early in the college experience. This early exposure also sensitizes faculty members to the needs of Latinx students. Colleges should use creativity and innovation to construct orientation and support experiences for

students and to evaluate the usefulness of those experiences (Herridge et al., 2020).

### **Mandatory Probationary Program**

A mandatory probationary program or workshop for students who have been identified or who self-identify as experiencing academic difficulty would be beneficial in educating students on the processes to avoid dismissal from the institution and ways to access resources to support their success. The program could address challenges such as those reported by the participants of this study: lack of guidance and communication, social issues, time management, health issues, self-advocacy, and support resources. The probationary program may be presented as a normal part of their college experience as opposed to being introduced only when students are facing academic hardship. Additionally, to avoid student feelings of embarrassment from being classified as on probation, the program can be presented in a video format that students can easily access with a live follow-up by advisors in small groups for personalized attention or to link students to peer mentors and advisors with tailored plans to support them (Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018).

### **Engagement Opportunities**

Providing Latinx students with diverse opportunities to engage with clubs, campus associations, and support services facilitates student engagement, which in turn cultivates their sense of belonging at the institution (Herridge et al., 2020). In this study, participants expressed a lack of knowledge about policies related to academic probation and expectations related to their degree goals. Even while on AP, participants lacked clarity about the duration of probation and the campus resources that could support them in improving their grades. Engagement opportunities provide clear expectations and goals for degree plans through academic and support advising for first-year Latinx students. Developing advising checklists advisors can use during their meetings with students can ensure they are covering the relevant policies and expectations.

It was unclear whether participants who opted to stop out due to their own frustration and feelings of failure could use campus services. Participants who worked full-time did not have time to engage in campus-based activities. Thus, alternative support and engagement options should be developed to engage this subgroup of

Latinx students. Weekend hours for support services, virtual tutoring and academic coaching, weekend events that include family, access to facilities during off-hours and weekends, and clubs that are sensitive to the evolving needs of nontraditional and Latinx students are some ways to address these issues. Increasing the collaboration between support services, faculty members, and student leadership to support students is crucial for the educational and social development of Latinx students at any institution (Barabe, 2017; Lester, 2013; Tinto, 1993; Tovar, 2015; Wark, 2015).

### Student Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are critical for students during stressful periods in their academic journeys. Participants in this study explained that during difficult times they developed strategies that helped them through their academic transitions. For one student, a method of coping was attending church services. In church, she found a community that was willing to listen, help, and support her through the crisis. Coping strategies can also be learned through workshops, academic coaching, and by forming small groups with similar interests. As early as student orientation, students can be taught to identify and develop coping mechanisms to help them locate resources during challenging periods in college. Many participants explained that they lacked guidance in their freshmen years and did not access resources on campus prior to being placed on AP. Placing tools and resources in a student's freshman toolkit and helping them develop coping skills early on will support retention (Barouch-Gilbert, 2015; DeVilbiss, 2014; Renzulli, 2015; Seirup & Rose, 2011).

### Multiple Information Streams Regarding AP Policy

Colleges can also create diverse information streams about academic probation policy to raise awareness of its implications for students. Be sure this information is clear during student orientation and initial meetings with academic program staff members and advisors. This information should also be posted across digital boards on campus, the college website, and the learning management system. Participants in this study explained that they were not aware of the probationary policy until they were placed on probation or blocked from registration. Latinx students access information through different

means and are often pressed for time. In this study, students were unaware of the AP policy, which is true in many cases (Moss & Yeaton, 2015; Wright, 2019). This implies that finding diverse means to communicate the AP policy is a possible strategy to improve students' experience. Being forewarned about AP may change students' initial negative reactions of emotional distress while supporting healthier reactions that can improve academic performance for freshmen students.

The following recommendations are for higher education administrators who influence institutional policies and practices.

### Policy Implications

Colleges use their AP policies to assist students in improving their grades after being placed on probation. Findings from this study demonstrate that institutions should reassess the factors and processes that lead to Latinx student placement on AP. Colleges should assess whether they are providing students the tools to proactively avoid placement on AP by exploring the following questions: Are incoming students aware of academic policies? Are there risk factors that can be identified early in the term that can lead to intervention and guidance prior to AP? Are there interventions that can prevent AP? How can faculty members form a part of the early identification of risk factors to connect students to services? How can support services collaborate with faculty members to support early intervention and the development of linkages to support networks for students at risk of failing a course? What actions can colleges take to establish connections and engagement with Latinx students? In asking these questions, colleges can identify gaps in communication and develop better strategies to communicate with Latinx students. We believe colleges can do better for their Latinx students.

### Dismissal Reinstatement Process

Participants who dropped out of the institutions did not know how to initiate reinstatement after being out of college for up to three years. They did not know whom to contact and felt ashamed of their failure, which led participants to seek support from TRIO programs or multicultural service departments. Participants averred that none of the AP processes were clear to them and that it took some time for them to re-enroll. One student stated that when he came back after

three years, a staff member mentioned that he must be on AP intervention for three quarters of the year and increase his grade point average. Another student came back after a year and the system allowed her to start again as a new student. It is imperative for these processes to be clear and accessible to students who desire to return to complete their degrees. It is equally critical to provide professional development for institutional staff members that allow them to better understand and support the needs of these students and follow up with those who have not returned to college.

### Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the experiences of Latinx community college students on AP to inform policies and practices that support Latinx students. There is still work to be done in developing targeted services and policies that support Latinx students' success in college, especially at institutions that have an emerging population of Latinx students. Institutions should continue to develop early intervention practices that engage students early in the enrollment process and provide information on academic expectations and processes. Furthermore, faculty and staff members should be culturally sensitive, identify at-risk students, and intervene prior to students' failure. Such preventative practices may be developed to address specific campus contexts. Developing culturally sensitive practices and ensuring that faculty and staff members understand students' struggles and help them develop coping mechanisms are practical ways to serve Latinx students on AP.

Guiding students through their transition to college is crucial for degree completion. Most Latinx students who participated in this study felt disconnected with their institution and were ashamed of being placed on probation; some of them did not inform their families about their circumstances. Students' experiences being mentored by faculty members and advisors caused them to reflect on the changes they needed to implement and bolstered their decision to return to college. They were able to manage their academic and personal obligations more effectively, demonstrating the positive impacts of targeted support and mentoring on the resilience of AP students. This study shows that early targeted attention, support, and linkages, as well as access to

resources, are effective means to support the academic needs of Latinx students in higher education. Future research should focus on academic probation interventions at community colleges that target emerging Latinx student populations.

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