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Navigating Academic Transitions: Challenges Faced by First-Generation Latino Men

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NAVIGATING ACADEMIC TRANSITIONS: CHALLENGES FACED BY FIRST GENERATION LATINO MEN

By **Jonathan Ulises Gutierrez**

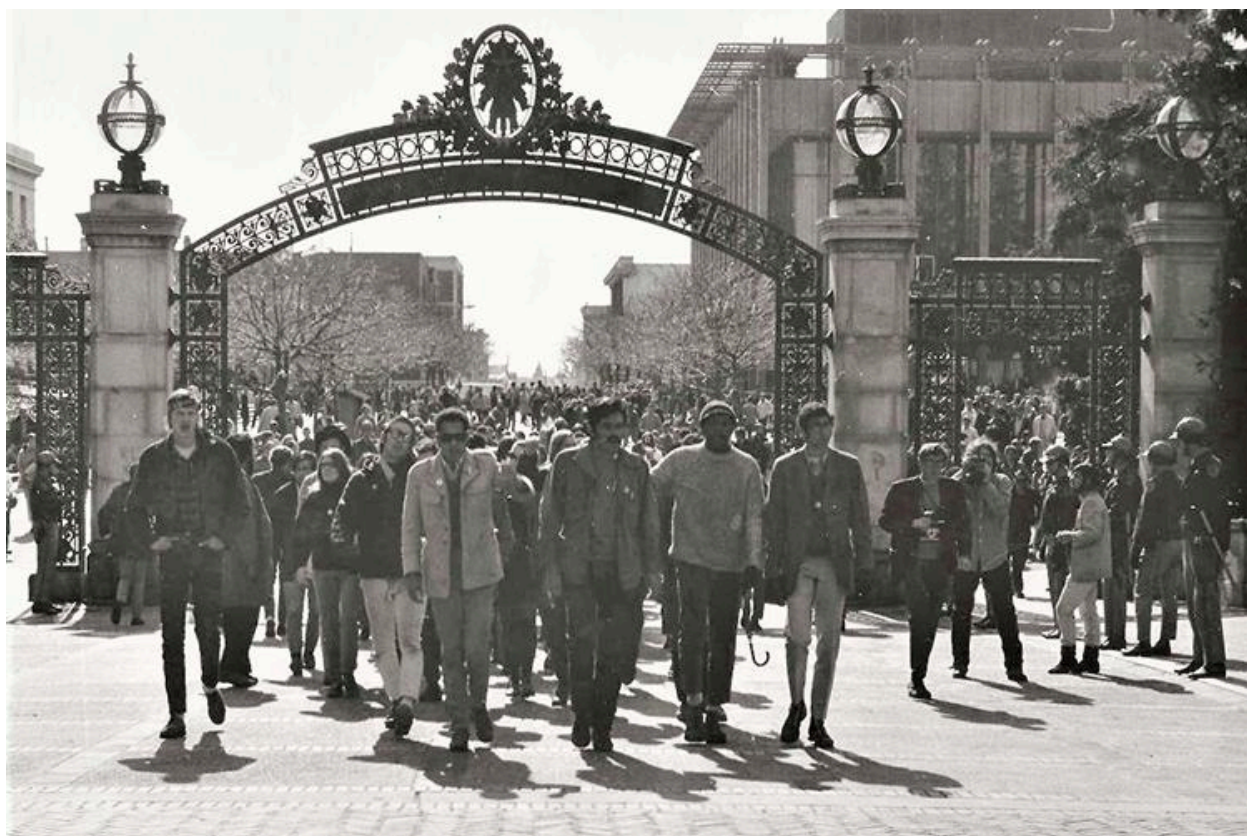


Figure 1: The 1969 Third World Liberation Front strike in Berkeley led to the founding of the Department of Ethnic Studies. While the movement spurred the creation of Latino studies programs nationwide, new programs have largely flatlined, UC Berkeley researchers say.¹

INTRODUCTION

What if first-generation students need help finding their community on campus? And what if academic regressions led to behavioral issues? According to Pew Research, roughly 70% of Latinos without a bachelor's degree reported needing to support their families financially and lack of affordability as their reasons for not pursuing higher education². This paper examines the experiences of male-identifying Latinos in college and what solutions they have taken to remedy their dilemmas.

¹ John Hickey, [*The 1969 strike at UC Berkeley was just the beginning of Oliver Jones's Battle*](#), (UC Berkeley News, February 5, 2019).

² Lauren Mora, [*Hispanic enrollment reaches new high at four-year colleges in the U.S., but affordability remains an obstacle*](#), (Pew Research Center, October 7, 2022).

Moreover, there will be an extensive analysis of the communities these men come from, specifically sons of immigrant households and low-income backgrounds, and the mental health resources available to them. A heavy distinction will be the different college levels, nationality, and whether they are an only child or have siblings. The focus on siblings is relevant in this study due to the importance of role models for first-generation students.

DATA & METHODS

Drawing upon interviews with current UC Berkeley students and recent graduates, my study seeks to understand how their identity as Latino males and first-generation college students shaped their collegiate experience. Specifically, my study explores how these intersecting identities impact educational experiences. This research can contribute and lay a foundation for further exploration of Latino men and the broader Latinx community.

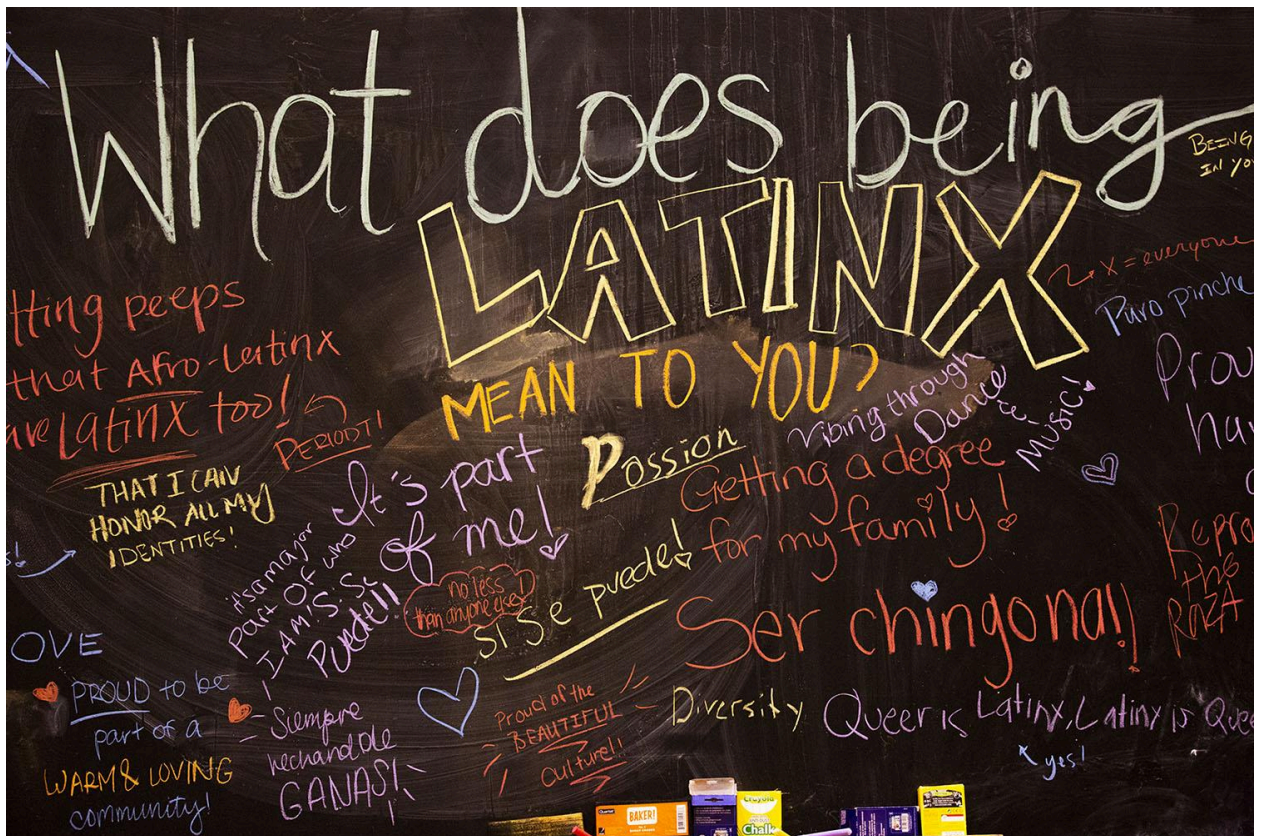


Figure 2: A chalkboard filled with messages of what being Latinx means to the people at California State University, Fullerton, in 2019.³

FINDINGS

1. Family Expectations and Understanding

³ Ben Papadopoulos, *[The Work of the Gender in Language Project](#)*, (Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies 2022).

Many first-generation Latino men found that their families did not fully grasp the significance of attending a prestigious institution like UC Berkeley. While some parents expressed pride and support, they often lacked understanding of the academic rigor and the challenges their children faced. For example, one student shared that his mother responded to his commitment to Berkeley with a casual "*Estas Bien*" ("you're good"), indicating a lack of emotional support. In contrast, another student's family viewed education as a pathway out of poverty, placing immense pressure on him to succeed. This disconnect in understanding often led to a lack of emotional support and increased stress.

“I CANNOT GIVE UP. WHO WOULD I BE IF I DID?”

- Sophomore, Mexican-American, First-Generation college student.

2. Academic Rigor and Resource Accessibility

Overwhelmingly, students underestimated the academic rigor of college compared to high school. Many struggled with the transition, particularly in writing-intensive courses and understanding the difference between upper and lower-division classes. Several students were unaware of the resources available to them, such as tutoring and office hours, often assuming these services had financial costs they could not afford. Discovering resources like the UC Berkeley food bank and learning centers later in their academic journey helped alleviate some stress, but the initial lack of knowledge hindered their early success.

3. Communication and Support Systems

Communication with family members varied widely among the students. Some maintained regular contact through phone calls and Facetime, sharing their experiences and receiving emotional support. For others, communication was more sporadic, often hindered by their family's lack of understanding of their academic challenges. Despite this, many students found ways to keep their families informed, such as sharing photos and updates about their college life. However, the quality of support and understanding from their families significantly impacted their stress levels and overall well-being.

“ÉCHALE GANAS!” Trans. “Give it your all!” or “Put in effort!”

- 2019 UC Berkeley Graduate, First-Generation college grad, Mexican.

4. Behavioral Changes and Stress Management

A common theme among the students was the high level of stress and pressure to succeed. Many experienced behavioral changes such as exhaustion, lack of motivation for family activities, and sleep deprivation. The need to balance academic responsibilities with family expectations and, in some cases, part-time work contributed to their stress. One student shared that he felt a strong internal pressure to succeed due to his family's financial situation, while another struggled with imposter syndrome and adjusting to the college grading system. Despite these challenges, the determination to succeed and serve as role models for their siblings and community often motivated them to persevere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase Funding for First-Generation Programs:

Advocate for increased California state funding to support first-generation college students through scholarships, grants, and retention initiatives. This could include expanding existing programs like the California Dream Act or creating new initiatives that offer financial support and resources. For instance, consider augmenting funding for scholarships like the California Latino Legislative Caucus Foundation Scholarship and enhancing financial aid opportunities through UC Berkeley's programs like the Osher Re-entry Scholarship.

Additionally, propose the development of new programs with fewer barriers to entry, removing restrictions such as minimum cumulative GPA or age limits. These changes ensure that financial support is more accessible to a broader range of first-generation students, enabling them to pursue higher education without undue limitations.

Mandate Cultural Competency Training for Faculty and Staff:

Advocate for the implementation of mandatory cultural competency training for all faculty and staff, starting with the University of California, Berkeley. This training should address the specific challenges faced by first-generation and male-identifying Latino students, aiming to foster a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. California's AB 101 mandates

Ethnic Studies in high schools, and UC Berkeley has historical ties to the Third World Liberation Movement, which underscores the relevance of expanding Ethnic Studies into higher education.

Expanding Access to Mental Health Services:

The University of California could require public universities to hire mental health professionals who specialize in the needs of male-identifying Latino men and first-generation students. This study revealed significant challenges in accessing mental health care, including difficulties in scheduling timely appointments and issues with insurance coverage. To address these issues, public universities should ensure that mental health services on campus are not only accessible but also culturally competent. This includes hiring professionals who are trained to understand the unique challenges faced by students from intense family backgrounds or domestic grievances.



Most college students today meet the criteria for at least one mental health issue. While the prevalence of these problems is similar across racial groups, students of color face greater barriers to treatment.⁴

Establish Statewide Mentorship Programs:

Developing and funding statewide mentorship programs that connect first-generation Latino students with alumni or professionals in their field of interest. An effective model for this initiative is the LatinoJustice PRLDEF LAWBound™ program in New York, which supports

⁴ Mary Ellen Flaannery, [*The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses*](#), National Education Association, March 29, 2023.

students by demystifying the law school admissions process and connecting them with experts in the legal field. Similar programs could be established in California to provide first-generation male-identifying latino students with resources, mentorship, and support needed to succeed in their chosen professions.

Create Statewide Family Engagement Initiatives:

Implementing policies that encourage universities to engage with families of first-generation students. This could include workshops, family orientation programs, and regular communication from universities to families, helping to bridge the gap between students' lives and their home environments.

For example, this initiative could build on existing programs like UC Berkeley's Summer Bridge Program or student organizations' Senior Weekend events, which allow students from low-income backgrounds to visit UC Berkeley before making a commitment. Participants in the study indicated that their families often did not fully understand the gravity of attending a prestigious institution or felt pressured by family burdens. Implementing these policies would enable families to witness firsthand the academic challenges their children face and the importance of a supportive home environment, thereby fostering a stronger support system for students.

CONCLUSION

By addressing these challenges, UC Berkeley can better support first-generation Latino men in their academic transitions, helping them to succeed and thrive in their college journey. The experiences of first-generation Latino men at UC Berkeley highlight a range of challenges related to family expectations, academic rigor, resource accessibility, communication, and stress management. Despite these obstacles, these students show resilience and determination to succeed. Their experiences underscore the need for better support systems and resources to help them navigate these transitions.

“BEING FIRST-GENERATION ISN'T A WEAKNESS, IT'S FUELED MOTIVATION”

Senior, Peruvian, First-Generation college student.