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Undergraduate

Student-Faculty Interactions: Understanding Mexican-American Community College Students

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Motivation

Before I begin with the presentation I would like to take a brief moment to explain the influence behind my research proposal. I myself am a first generation student; most of my family immigrated to the United States from Mexico and before I decided to enroll in community college I found myself reproducing the same path my parents were on when they arrived to the US. That changed however, when I first enrolled in my community college. There, I not only got to meet students who were experiencing the same issues I faced, but most students also had the same goals as I did, which was to transfer to a four-year institution. Noticing this caused me to become more interested in the crucial role faculty have on minority students and how they could be a source of empowerment for them.

I. Community Colleges in the Spectrum of Higher Education

Since community colleges first entered the higher education system they had one goal — to provide access for students to increase their probability of upward social mobility and a good quality education. (Brint and Karabel 1989).

However, this had repercussions in the future, especially students who already faced challenges in attending higher education. For example, the 1960s Master Plan recommended that students be allocated to University of California and California state universities based on grade point average (Brint and Karabel 1989; Daugherty 1994). It also proposed diverting large number of students away from UC's and Cal-states into community colleges by allowing students to take lower division and vocational during their enrollment in community college. What Brint and Karabel (1989) found was that students, instead of being warmed up to the idea of transferring to a four-year university, were essentially cooled out from making the intention to transfer from community college (Clark 1960). Therefore, although community colleges aimed to create access to those who were underrepresented and in fact did achieve this goal, the key point here is that community colleges significantly diverged more students away than it actually encouraged to transfer to a UC or Cal-state or for that matter a private university.

For decades now, community colleges have provided students with access to lower division courses required for transfer, offered programs that focus on job training/vocation, their cost of tuition is lower than four-year institutions, and they are typically closer to the home (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Chang, 2005; Dougherty, 1994; Townsend, 2007; Wassmer et. al., 2004). At the core of the community college system, however, lie barriers that minority students

have been facing since its establishment: a weak path to transfer to four-year institutions (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Daugherty, 1994; Kao and Thompson, 2003). This pattern has continued to be the experience for minority students who have been historically more likely to begin their post-secondary journey at community college; thus, reflecting the low degree attainment minority students hold today (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Kao and Thompson, 2003).

This research aims to shed light on one specific minority group that has faced such challenges: Mexican-American community college students.

II. Research Questions

The questions that I aim to explore for this research are: To what extent does student-faculty interaction in community college influence Mexican-American students likelihood to pursue a bachelor degree or higher? And What role does student-faculty interaction have in the academic persistence of Mexican-American students? With these questions I aim to fill the gap in the current literature on student faculty interaction and it effects, specifically on Mexican-American students.

III. Student-faculty Interaction

Research on student-faculty interactions at the community college has steadily increased over the past decades. As a result, documented literature continues to support significant impact student-faculty interaction has on students' persistence in their academic endeavors (Astin 1993; Chang 2005; Cole 2010). Outcomes such as increased academic effort, increased self-efficacy, and student satisfaction are all positively correlated with student-faculty interaction (Cotten and Wilson 2006; Endo and Harpel 1982; Thompson 2001). Thompson (2001) discussed that students with stronger "interpersonal relations with faculty tend to reveal higher degrees of academic skill development" which may encourage the students persistence to transfer to a four-year university (p. 35). Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) also acknowledge that the quality of interaction between the student and the professor has a greater influence than how frequently they interact. That being said, there is a lack of literature investigating the impact student-professor interactions have on underrepresented students (e.g. African Americans and Asian Americans), especially Mexican-American students, which are the primary focus of this project. Here I present the most what encapsulates most research on student-faculty interactions:

- Positive impact on students' academics (e.g. self-efficacy, academic effort, academic satisfaction)
- Less student-faculty interaction at community college
- First-generation students are less satisfied with their interaction with faculty

Studies that have thus far looked at student-faculty interaction illustrate how minority college students oftentimes enter community college with a certain conviction (i.e. experiencing racism or cultural differences) that conditions their perceptions of interacting with their professors (Chang 2005).

However, the majority of research focusing on student-faculty interaction focuses on four-year universities; thus leaving community colleges and the students' experiences in the shadows. As such, this research focuses on the experiences Mexican-American students have in community college and the role student-faculty interaction has toward their academic goals.

IV. Latin@s In Higher Education

Before focusing specifically on Mexican-American students in higher education, attention needs to be given to the placement of the entire Latin@¹ population in higher education. It is important to recognize that as a whole, enrollment in higher education for the Latin@ population has increased and so has degree attainment. The problem, however, is that degree attainment amongst the entire Latin@ population is dramatically low compared to the over all Latin@ population size in the United States (Martinez and Fernandez 2004; Hubard and Malagon 2006; Suro and Passel 2003; Solorzano and Yosso 2000).

Research that has been gathered on Latin@s in community college all shows the following:

- Latin@ enrollment has grown up to 25 percent in higher education, but 60 percent begin at the community college level
- Starting point for many Latin@ students in higher education is community college
- Each Latin@ subgroup faces challenges in the educational system – not all groups face the same social, cultural and economic barriers

However, since studies typically focus on Latina/os as homogenous group there is a need for studies to focus on single subgroups that belong to the Latina/o population. For this reason, it is important to disaggregate Mexican-American students from the rest of the Latino population in order to get a better understanding of the barriers they face in transferring to four-year institutions and increasing degree attainment (Martinez and Fernandez 2004; Huber and Malagon 2006).

V. Population Demographics

So you may be asking why Mexican American students only? Studies on Latin@ demographics in the US show that Latin@s are estimated to become the largest racial group in the US between 2000 and 2020 (Suro and Passel 2003). Figure 1. shows that Mexican Americans are the largest subgroup from the entire Latina@ population and their numbers are expected to grow in the coming years (Motel and Patten 2012). The reason why this is important is because as the population continues to grow for Latina@ and even more so for Mexican-Americans in the US, it will consequently shift the impact it has on the US educational system. With such a large population falling behind in academics, we can expect that it will not only have an impact in the educational system, but will also impact other social institutions, such as employment.

¹ For the remainder of this paper, Latino will be referred to as Latin@ or Latin@s for the purpose of being inclusive of men and women.

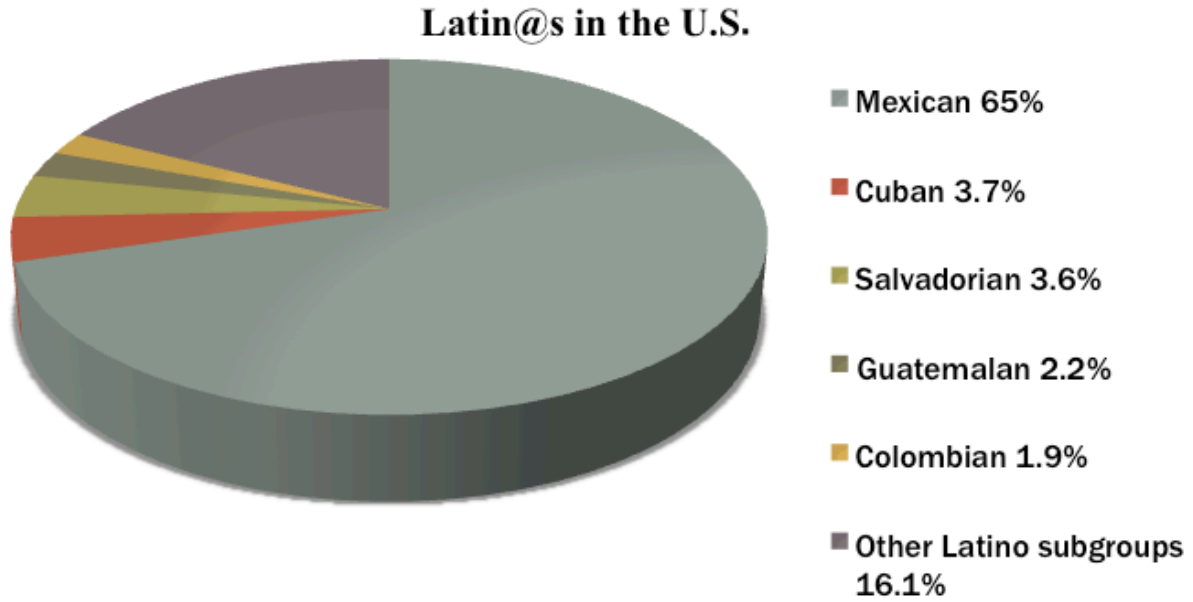


Figure 1. Source: PEW Hispanic Center, Motel and Patten 2012

VI. Bachelor Degree Attainment or Higher Amongst Latin@ Subgroups

Figure 2. illustrates the actual degree attainment for some of the Latin@ subgroups in the US (Motel and Patten 2012). Overall, we can see that 13% of all Latina@s have a BA or higher. However, when we begin to look at each group individually and compare it to the actual population size, we can see that it might be the case that one or two groups may be responsible for influencing the numbers of degree attainment.

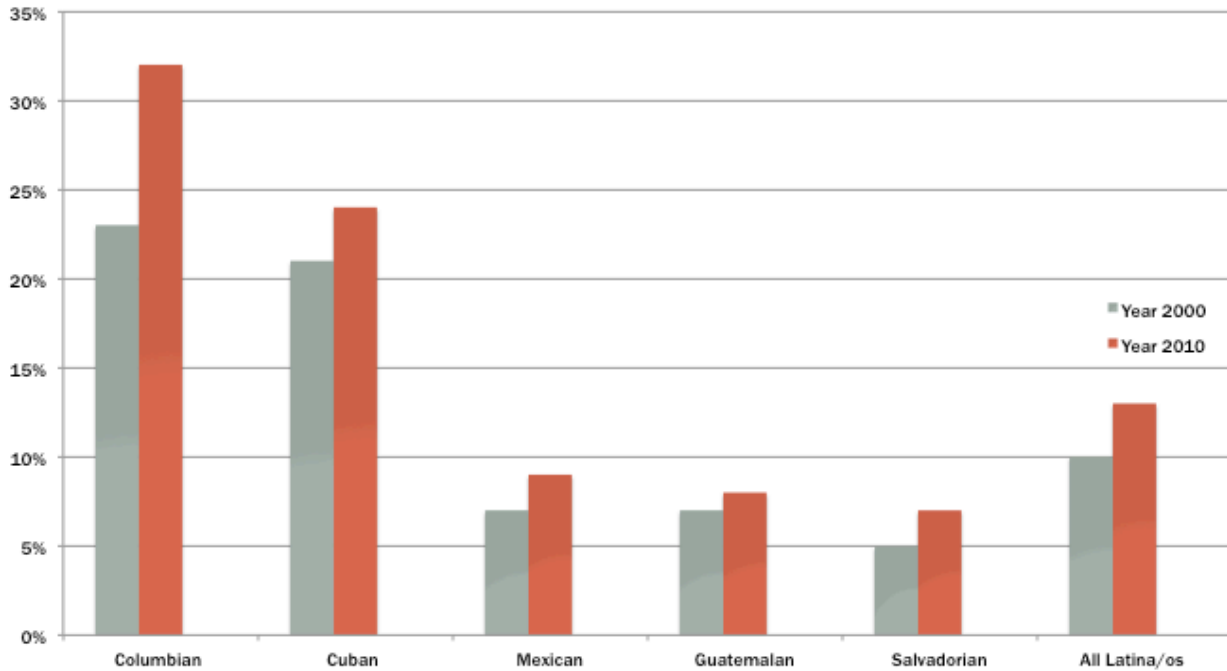


Figure 2. Source: PEW Hispanic Center, Motel and Patten 2012

As mentioned, Latin@s are the largest minority-majority group in the United States and being that most enter the higher education system through community college, attention needs to be given to the role that community colleges have on the attainment of B.A. or higher by focusing how they can increase rates of retention and transfer to four-year institutions (Martinez and Fernandez 2004; Huber and Malagon 2006; Rendon and Valadez, 1993). Mexican-Americans will be an important part of this demographic change, as they currently make up over 64 percent of the total Latin@ population in the U.S. (Motel and Patten 2012).

VII. Existing theories

For this research I have relied on several sociological and educational theories. Of them I believe these are some of the most important for the explanation of my analysis and preliminary findings, which will be discussed shortly.

One theoretical concept I relied on was Bourdieu's theory of *Habitus*. According to Bourdieu (1984) and others who have expanded on his ideas, the *habitus* can be understood as a system of dispositions that is both structured by the individual's social background and subsequently structures future perceptions and appreciations in the individual's lifetime. That is not to say that the individual, or student in this case, has a written agenda for their future based on the social background they come from, but one can more or less see the likelihood of a student coming to understand, appreciate, and navigate the educational system with confidence or no confidence, based on their social background.

Another of Bourdieu's concepts that I rely on is **Cultural capital**. Cultural capital for this research will be defined as the amount of knowledge transferred to students within the educational institution that promotes both social mobility and social awareness (Bourdieu 1986). I rely this because, although the students domestic sphere such as friends and family hold many important roles such transferring familial norms and cultural background, families who come from immigrant backgrounds or low-socioeconomic status and have no clear understanding of how to navigate the educational institution may not provide the student with the cultural capital needed to succeed in higher education. As such, one of the most important figures that they are most likely to interact with is the professor; who will be able to transfer knowledge to the student.

In addition, however, **Social capital** is just as important because the student will be able to build connections with his or her professor who has networks with valuable resources that will help the student in his or her academic career (Bourdieu 1986). This however, also depends on the professor's attitude and determination to his or her students' success. Stanton-Salazar (2011) builds from this framework by noting that within the institution there are two key agents for students:

1. Institutional agent, who can be considered one who occupies a position of authority and has access to highly valued resources in the institution
2. Empowerment agent, who is considered the ultimate network for minority students and who will provide them the support necessary to succeed

The difference between the two is that the institutional agent fulfills the expected duties of a professor in a college. For example, coming to class, giving lectures, grading papers, providing the student with feed-back on how to improve grade. On the other hand the empowerment agent is aware of the disadvantages minority students may face and they are unwilling to act on the establishment of consolidating resources only within the upper levels of the educational hierarchy and see themselves as a source of empowerment for students not only in higher education, but in their community as well. One example, amongst many, is the role Sal Castro played for students during the walkouts of 1968, which occurred in the Los Angeles area. Sal Castro's devotion to social justice for students went beyond the classroom. He raised awareness and participated in protests that led the Chicano movement to achieve the goal of instituting Chicano studies, respect and motivation of Chicano students in the educational system. Now, the point here is not that professors actively participate in protests on behalf of students, but that they are aware of the position minority students are in within the educational system and encourage them to persist in their academic goals. In every sense of the word, to empower minority students beyond the lecture room.

Lastly, this research relies on **Cole's Four Categories** of student-faculty interaction (2010). The first two categories can be considered a formal ways of interaction insofar as they will mostly take place in the classroom (Cole 2010). For example, we first have the expected interaction between the professor and the student—this can be anything from actually going to class and lecturing to giving handouts and assigning homework.

The second category is going over course work and paying specific attention to the student participation in class (Cole 2010). Once we get to the second category of interaction we will begin to see if the student and professors interaction will either increase or stay at the expected level of interaction.

In Cole's (2010) third category the interaction between the student and professor work at a more personal level; for example going out for coffee or lunch and discuss research opportunities, scholarships and universities to which will be best for the students academic interests.

Lastly, the student must also assess their own interaction with their professor (Cole 2010). This is important because depending on the students experience in class will ultimately affect their interaction with their professor outside of class, which can impact their overall student academic achievement.

VIII. Methodology

This study relied on qualitative methods to gather data. The targeted population for this study is Mexican-American students from two campuses within the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). Students were recruited during the summer semester of 2015 at both campuses. For the purpose of this research, the names of the institutions where students were recruited have been assigned a pseudonym in order to protect the identity of students and professors at these institutions. The pseudonyms used for the colleges chosen are Castro College and Sunset College. I focused on these two specific colleges because they have the highest enrollment rates of Latin@s and they are located in areas that are predominantly Latin@ (LACCD, 2012). LACCD Institutional Effectiveness (2014) reports that over 50 percent of students enrolled in at least one of the nine campuses are Latin@.² As such, for this phase of my research I focused only Mexican-Americans students, who are highly concentrated in the Los Angeles area (Motel & Patten, 2012).

Participants for this research were selected through purposive sampling. Recruiting from Castro College and Sunset College through purposive sampling was most feasible for this research insofar as these colleges attract predominantly Latin@ students due to their geographic location in the Los Angeles area. Thus, using any form of randomization will result in recruitment of not only Mexican-American students, but also other students from various Latin@ subgroups.

Selection of classes where students were recruited from was selected based on subjects that are considered mostly interactive. For example classes such as Sociology, History, English, and political science across many other social science and humanities classes being offered over the summer semester we looked into. Professors were emailed about the research project and a total of three classes were selected based on the responses received from professors. Of the other classes that were notified about the research recruitment, one class was canceled and no response was ever received from the professors for the other classes. Participants were recruited by going to the classes that approved the research project for recruitment. On the first day of the semester I attended lecture for the selected classes and asked if any Mexican-American students were

² The reason why some students may be enrolled in more than one college is because colleges offer different courses and some may not be offered the their primary college.

interested in participating in the study. A total of 12 students, 2 from Sunset College and 8 from Castro College, were recruited by making announcements in class. The students who fit the demographics of my research, for instance, Mexican-American over the age of eighteen, attending participatory were selected from classes where I announced my project. A total of eight females and two males decided to participate in the research project.

IX. Preliminary Findings

Over the course of my research these have been some common patterns I saw amongst most, if not all, participants.

Most is supported by recent research, such as:

- College attendance: 3-4 years. Expected transfer within the next 2-3years
- Most have learned to navigate the system on their own or through mutual friends
- None visited administration for help
- None visit office hours, unless they need to talk about their grade

Findings that I am building on as the research continues are:

- Race is not important in regards to their interaction with professors
- Most have expressed that it's important for professors to take interest in their students and that it's a good boost of confidence
- Students seem to think that counselors are the go-to person regarding transfer information whereas professors mainly function for lecture related concerns
- Towards the end of the interviews, students began to recognize the importance of seeking help from their professors outside of class; this is something they plan on doing in the future

While these may just be some preliminary findings, I plan to use them by connecting to the existing theories I mentioned earlier.

X. Contributions

With this research I hope to reach three important goals:

1. Bring awareness of the lack of literature on not only Mexican-Americans in community colleges, but also other Latino groups in community college, which are often only researched as a homogeneous group.
2. Contribute to the actual data of Mexican-American students, which are the largest and growing Latino group in the United States.
3. To help improve student-faculty interaction and pedagogical modes of teaching/interacting in the classroom, which may have positive affects such as influencing students to strive for transferring to a four-year university.

XI. Our Responsibility As Professors and Students

I would like to end this presentation by noting that we have duty not only as professors or students, but as representatives of a community. We need to harness the power of education because it will transform future generations of not only Mexican American students, but also other underrepresented and minority communities. All it takes is a source of empowerment and we can be that source and encourage those who are empowered to serve as empowerment agents for other students or for their community as a whole. Thank you.

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