

Integrating Parent Education and Support in College Access and Persistence Programs:

Implications for Practitioners Working with Latino Students

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**Abstract**

The effective outreach to and persistence of Latino students has been a constant priority for many higher education institutions. The information presented in this paper adds to the body of literature around higher education enrollment by examining the influence of family in the recruitment and retention of prospective and current college Latino students. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it reviews current literature related to family involvement for Latino students. Second, it highlights the influence Latino families have in the role of retention and outreach. Lastly, it discusses best practices when effectively working with Latino families to promote student success at the higher education level.

*Keywords:* family, parents, Latino/a, academic persistence, access, outreach

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Ever since I can recall, discussions around parental involvement in school have been highly dichotomized. At one end of the spectrum, I remembered various educators' subtle but firm beliefs about the absent role of many Latino<sup>1</sup> parents in their students' K-12 education. On the other end, these same educators would verbalize negative beliefs about the high—sometimes deemed excessive—involvement of many White, affluent parents. As I continued through the educational pipeline, the level of parental involvement perceived through my college choice process further accentuated this dichotomy. “Helicopter parents,” “Blackhawks,” “toxic,” and “consumer advocates,” were terms commonly reserved for over-involved parents. Although these terms expressed some negativity, their undertone still suggested a level of parental involvement, educational support, and care. However, terms like, “hindrance,” “roadblocks” and even “ignorant” were most commonly reserved for Latino parents. These expressions exaggerated a negative assumption about Latino parents' educational involvement and their presumed lack of support for their children's educational success beyond secondary school.

These polar opposites may not capture the entire complexity of the situation, but they clearly denote a trend in the dominant conception of parental involvement as filtered by one's race and class. My professional experiences as a graduate student resonated in large part with my personal experiences in the K-12 system. Working for the Offices of New Student Orientation both at the University of Utah and at the University of Colorado, I learned firsthand about the value a comprehensive introductory program has for the success of new students. The institutional mission of both of these offices view parents as partners in the success of students, and offer programming that capitalizes on parents' inclination to see their students do well. Yet,

through keen observation of these programs, I have noted that they predominantly attract and serve White parents and families, many of whom already possess the knowledge, confidence, and entitlement needed to access institutions of higher education. In turn, the parent programming at both of these institutions saw remarkably low numbers of parents and families from underrepresented backgrounds.

In my own educational journey, family, but more so my parents' sacrifice as immigrants to this country, is one of the strongest motivators helping me to succeed. Still, I notice the more education I attained, the less able my parents were to understand and connect with my experiences. I began to feel a great disconnect between my parents and my experiences at the University. The role I played in my family was quickly shifting as I struggled to not only balance my different emerging responsibilities as a college student, but to interpret them to my parents as well. This increasing gap was one of the major obstacles hindering my educational pathway. At times I found it difficult to integrate my family's expectations of me with my responsibilities as a college student. Similarly, my family found it very difficult to connect with my rapidly changing life. The preponderance of these personal experiences became the incentive for my professional interest in family relations, and the impetus for my research in this area.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Across the nation, student affairs professionals have acknowledged the importance of working with underrepresented families when promoting student success, but often lack the necessary specialized knowledge, resources, and tools to do so. The National NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) Parent and Family Knowledge Community (2010) identified research on and programming for parents of students of color and first generation parents as two prominent topics central to the work of practitioners fostering parent and college

relations. The information presented in this paper will not only focus on the Latino community, but will also explore the intersection between Latino student success and family involvement. As the largest ethnic group in the nation, it is important to highlight the role families have in the success of Latino college students, and devise ways to partner and empower Latino families to enhance the enrollment rates, and academic persistence of Latino students in higher education.

### **Urgency of Working with the Latino Community**

The Latino population in the United States has increased exponentially over the last few decades (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). This large growth has categorized Latinos as the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). Currently, Latinos make up 15.4% of the total US population; this number is expected to more than triple by the year 2050 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). The significant increase of this population has required educators to rethink their practices, and become conscious of how their services promote the success of all their students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). For example, institutions across the nation have adopted remarkable programs—such as Upward Bound or Gear Up—which seek to increase the number of underserved youth graduating from high school, entering college, and graduating from universities. Yet, despite the efforts to recruit and retain these students, the number of Latino students entering and graduating from college still remains at an all time low (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), making this large demographic one of the least likely to persist towards college graduation (Hill & Torres, 2010; Oseguera et al., 2009).

The total percentage of Latino youth graduating from high school every year is approximately 60% on average (Ceja, 2006). College-bound Latinos are also statistically less likely to enroll in four-year universities after high school graduation (Ceja, 2006; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005). Of the Latino students who do enroll in college, on average only 46%

attain their bachelor's degrees (Oseguera et al., 2009). Utilizing a smaller representational sample, research by the National Council for Educational Statistics (2003) mapped the educational journey of 100 Latino students through the higher education pipeline. Their research concluded that only 57 Latino students will graduate from high school. Of these 57 students, only 11 will graduate from a four-year college (see Figure 1 for a complete breakdown of the Latino persistence funnel). In contrast to other ethnic groups in the study, Latinos had the lowest representation in higher education, once again affirming the notion that Latino students are the least likely of all ethnic groups to enroll in higher education and to persist towards college graduation. While it is difficult for any student to graduate from college, for Latino youth who intersect several different matrices of oppression based on their race, class, gender, or presumed legal status, attaining a college degree involves navigating through a series of obstacles, negotiations, and compromises (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

Traditionally, Latino pipeline programs have emphasized access to higher education for this population, but as important as recruitment is, the services designed to retain Latino students already attending college are just as valuable. Critical Race Theory scholars (Gonzalez, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000) contend that recruiting Latino students to campus, without providing them with the infrastructure needed to succeed in higher education is a disservice to this community. In alignment with the culture of many higher education institutions, student support services tend to focus solely on the student, bypassing essential opportunities to incorporate students' families in their goals of student success (Torres & Marquez, 2005). Consequently, overlooking the significant influence Latino families play in the lives and success of their children is also a missed opportunity for student affairs professionals to better and more holistically serve Latino students throughout the educational pipeline.

Research on college success has consistently demonstrated that parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement (Auerbach, 2004, 2006; Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Mena & Guardia, 2007). For the Latino community and other underrepresented communities, creating spaces at the higher education level for parental and family involvement is not only a practical intervention but also one that is vital for student success (Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Fostering participation from Latino parents and families amounts to various opportunities and benefits for an institution of higher education, including higher enrollment rates, increased student retention, increased community and student diversity, and richer human resources and capital (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). In other words, working with Latino families and integrating them into the recruitment and retention efforts of higher education, could vastly increase the success of these programs and by default improve the current condition of Latino students in the United States.

The process of creating a partnership with families begins with an intention to include parents and family as active partners in the success of their students. This paper will investigate the current literature around Latino family integration in higher education as it relates to two of the most discussed impacts of Latino parental involvement: enrollment and access to higher education; and student persistence and retention. This literary analysis begins by defining the concept of parental involvement, its historical conception, and particular intricacies. The analysis is further organized into two main branches of discussion. First, is the role of family pertaining to outreach and access efforts; the second is the role of family in the process of student retention and persistence. The intent of this analysis is to move beyond traditional paradigms of parental engagement by validating the complexity salient in the lives of Latino families. The paper will conclude with the implications of this research in the work of student

affairs professionals.

### **Academic Classes Influencing Topic**

Beyond my personal and professional interests, three classes from my academic program also sparked my initial curiosity and understanding of this topic. First, the Student Retention Theory course provided me with an understanding of the factors influencing student persistence. Through course discussions and colleagues' presentations, I not only learned about the pivotal role families have on Latino college student retention, but also the influence they have on their attrition from higher education. This initial class assertion intrigued me and motivated me to further pursue this hypothesis. Second, the theoretical concepts from the Multiculturalism and Diversity in Higher Education course allowed me to frame this issue from a social justice perspective, rather than from a deficit base. As such, I emphasize the institution's role in the success of Latino students and in the involvement of their families, rather than resting the responsibility for success solely on the students and their families. Finally, the Budget and Planning in Higher Education course provided me with a thorough understanding of the critical role of strategy and tactics as they relate to strategic planning, institutional change, and social justice work. The concepts learned in this class, laid the foundation for the development of the implications section of this analysis.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The majority of literature around parental involvement and engagement in schools is situated within the K-12 context. At the higher education level, the literature around parental involvement and post-secondary education is much more limited. Utilizing class readings and resources as an initial starting point, the articles reviewed here focus on the role families have in the education of their children throughout the higher education pipeline. Because the higher

education pipeline can be rather ambiguous, only articles that discussed the influence family and parents have on higher education attainment were selected. Articles were deemed relevant if they addressed Latino/a student outreach and persistence, and shared insight on how family and parents (either directly or indirectly) affect the outcomes for students through these two crucial points of the higher education pipeline. While an effort was made to gather quantitative research, much of the literature gathered on this topic is qualitative in nature.

### **The Changing Relationship Between Higher Education and Students' Families**

The concept of parental involvement in college borrows its theoretical underpinnings from the K-12 field. In this context, parent involvement is one of the profession's primary pillars aiding in the success of students (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Parent and family involvement in this setting is separated into two broad realms: (a) the external realm occurring every time a parent interacts with the school; and (b) the internal realm occurring every time discussions of school happen between the parent and the student. Out of the two, the internal realm is the most popular type of involvement throughout the K-16 educational pipeline (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Epstein and Sanders (2000) conceptualize the importance of this practice through their theory of overlapping spheres of influence. In this model, student success is attributed to three main spheres: (a) family, (b) school, and (c) community. These spheres overlap in a manner that explains their interdependency in the success of students (see Figure 2). The theory assumes that each sphere has a different manner of promoting students' success, and that the goal of educational leaders should be to coordinate the efforts of these spheres as a way to maximize results. However, it is only through the development of intentional partnerships, and active communication that these spheres are able to align. Even though a popular critique of this theory has been the lack of autonomy students have in the model, the theory is particularly useful for

placing family as an important entity in the success of students. Given that parents who were involved in the K-12 system are likely to be involved in higher education (Downs et al., 2008), it is logical that variations of this model are being integrated into university contexts. Yet, unlike primary and secondary education, historically, colleges were designed to restrict the participation of parents in their students' education.

Over time, the interaction between institutions of higher education and students' families has shifted as the governing philosophy of colleges has changed. In their early incarnation, American universities adopted the European concept of *in loco parentis* (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). *In loco parentis*, which literally translates to "in the place of the parent," gave university administrators the authority to act on behalf of a parent (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). This ideology gave university administrators oversight over college students' safety, social welfare, and moral development. This given authority resulted in lasting institutional policies reflecting the dominant culture's societal values and customs. College was thought of as a separation of the student from the family, with the institution taking over the duties of the parent. The high number of veterans attending college after the passage of the G.I. Bill in the 1940's, the surge of independence brought by social movements in the 60s, and the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1971, which decreased the legal adult age to 18, brought about yet another institutional change culminating in the passage of FERPA (Family Education Records Protection Act) in 1974 restricting parents' access to student records, and further cementing their role as spectators. College students demanded autonomy not just from their families, but also from the institution.

The next three decades saw university governance shift again. Administrators were at a crossroads between policies that promoted student autonomy and legal cases that held higher

education institutions accountable for the well being, protection, safety, and success of their students (Mena & Guardia, 2007). This era of changes, coupled with the K-12 push for parental involvement, jumpstarted current initiatives shifting the role of parents from spectators to partners; acknowledging them as allies in securing the protection, well being and success of their children. FERPA was amended to allow administrators to communicate with parents when dealing with certain conduct problems, or with specific health and safety concerns (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). Currently, institutions are seeing the emergence of various offices and divisions designed to work with parents and families of college students (Torres & Marquez, 2005). Yet, the role of these offices is quickly shifting too, as they struggle to find a balance between managing parents' interactions with their college students—sometimes working to minimize this interaction—and providing resources for parents to effectively aid their students.

#### **The intricacies of parental involvement in higher education.**

Parental involvement in higher education has direct benefits, as well as potential risks to the student. Family involvement in college includes parents or significant individuals “showing interest in the lives of their [college students], gaining more information about college, knowing when and how to appropriately provide encouragement and guidance to their student, connecting with the institution, and potentially retaining that institutional connection beyond the college years” (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009, p. 328). Literature on parental involvement suggests that parents have a large influence on students' choice of institution, as well as career and major aspirations for their children (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008; Wolf et al., 2009). Sociological research by Tierney and Auerbach (2005) affirmed that involvement from parents, regardless of educational background, is the single most important factor influencing students' educational aspirations for college—more important than student GPA. Still, parents' educational

background and socioeconomic status are the strongest predictors of college student enrollment and achievement in college (Desmond, Lopez, & Turley, 2009). Within the context of higher education, parents have traditionally been engaged in the college enrollment process, helping students submit their applications, and decide where to enroll, and which college activities to be involved in, as well as assisting with general problem solving, and providing psychological, financial and social support once in college (Wolf et al., 2009). Drawbacks of over-involvement by parents during these early exploratory stages may include unrealistic career expectations, and conformity over autonomy for the student (Desmond et al., 2009). As such, it is imperative for parent and family liaisons to have clear guidelines and goals when working with parents.

The metaphor of an umbrella has often been used to guide parent relationships (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). The umbrella analogy suggests families use their umbrellas in situations where they are needed or when their students ask them for help. Furthermore, the umbrella concept places families next to students, rather than in front of them, when problem solving, reminiscent of the way someone would share an umbrella. This analogy assumes, however, that parents have the resources, knowledge, and access to an umbrella, to know when to help their students, and that students will know when to ask their families for help. For historically disenfranchised families and students of color who intersect different class and educational backgrounds, this may not be the case (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Higher education must first understand how power influences the experiences of its diverse student body, before creating programs and policies that serve them effectively (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

In the same manner that parental involvement in higher education has been influenced by shifts in the philosophy of schools, power has also been a critical factor determining who participates in higher education and in what capacity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Auerbach

(2004) reported that parents receive information, guidance, and cues for involvement from multiple sources. These include personal experience, social networks, and university resources. The amount and type of resources available to parents determines the manner in which they participate in their children's education (Tierney & Auerbach 2005). In contrast to parents with little to no postsecondary experience, parents with greater educational attainment have greater access to resources and social networks that facilitate knowledge of the higher education setting, the role education plays in social mobility and how it influences one's personal development (Wolf et al., 2009).

Latino families and parents are differently positioned in the pursuit for higher education in terms of knowledge, power, and socioeconomic relations. Their social position coupled with class barriers have limited Latino families' access to social networks, connections, and the cultural capital necessary to navigate educational institutions (Jun & Colyar, 2002), and similarly from getting involved with educational institutions (Perna & Titus, 2005). Consequently, the social, cultural, and symbolic assets of Latino families are rarely validated in higher education (Auerbach, 2006). As a result, college programs rarely reach out to Latino families in meaningful, culturally appropriate ways, further exacerbating the information and achievement gap in this community. This essentially creates a situation where both institutions of higher education, and Latino families are concerned with the success of their students, yet neither is communicating (or knows how to communicate) with the other, thus many times creating conflicting and frustrating environments for all three entities involved in this process.

### **Contextualizing Latino Families**

The Latino identity is a diverse and encompassing one (Torres, 2004). According to the U.S. census, Latinos are considered a pan-ethnic group rather than a racial group. Under this

classification Latino/a individuals can identify with any of the four major races of the United States. Scholars, including renowned Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), have elevated the Latino status to that of a “cosmic race,” encompassing a large variety of languages, ethnicities, races, skin colors, religions, sexualities, nationalities, political identities, and legal and generational statuses. Accordingly, it is very difficult to talk about the Latino experience because there is no universal experience with the magnitude to represent the entire diversity of this group. Because of the complexity within the larger understanding of the Latino/a identity, family structures also vary greatly. Given this complexity, the following analysis of parental involvement will center on the experiences of immigrant heterosexual Latino families—whenever possible focusing on undocumented<sup>2</sup> Latino families—and Latino families whose children are the first in their families to go to college. This subgroup not only makes up a large component of the total Latino population in the United States (see Table 1), but is also one of the most at risk populations for high school and college success (Gildersleeve, 2010; Perez, 2010).

### **Latino families’ conception of education.**

At both the K-12 and higher education levels, much has been hypothesized and discussed regarding Latino/a student achievement. Although researchers suggest a plethora of factors influencing achievement for this group (Hill & Torres, 2010), popular explanations for the low success rates of this population have centered on the lack of parental involvement and general low educational expectations held by Latino parents (Ceja 2004, 2006; Zalaquett, 2005). However, in order to fully understand involvement for this group, one must first understand how education is perceived, understood, and viewed by Latino families. From a cultural lens, Latino parents do not necessarily define involvement as interactions with the school; rather they define involvement in terms of support and encouragement for their students (Auerbach, 2006).

Empirical data supports this statement, suggesting that Latino students are more likely to report below average involvement from parents in regards to academic matters, but above average results for parental communication (Wolf et al., 2009). Although the exact content of these conversations is unknown, Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese and Garnier's (2001) research theorized that Latino parental contact and conversations occurring outside the institution focus on "the expectations, support, and desires Latino families have for their children to attain the highest levels of education possible" (p. 552). This finding alone begins to complicate the mainstream construction about Latino parental involvement and family dynamics that influence their children's educational attainment.

Tseng (2004) reported that immigrant families, as well as families of first generation college students express a stronger orientation towards interdependency than later generation and White European families. This phenomenon is expressed through actions, obligations, and commitments that prioritize the family's well being over their own. Although scholars disagree on the exact reason for this phenomenon, it is generally thought to be a combination of the families' cultural roots (Tseng, 2004), a response to the challenges of settling in a new country (Jarama, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996), and a coping mechanism for the discrimination, racism, and classist policies faced by Latino/a individuals in the U.S. (Torres, 2004). Accordingly, family interdependence operates to both facilitate and impede academic adjustment. On the one hand, strong family interdependence has been shown to motivate students within immigrant families to succeed in college (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006). Recognition of their family obligations has been linked to high academic motivation. For example, students are motivated to repay parental investments and sacrifices and aspire to be better positioned to support their families in the future. On the other hand, family responsibilities and obligations detract from their

scholastic achievement, especially in college, where courses are significantly more arduous (Sanchez et al., 2005). This strong family orientation creates mixed messages for Latino students who are forced to negotiate dominant beliefs that stress independence from family and parents as a rite of passage in college, while their present reality maybe an intrinsically interconnected relationship with their family (Desmond et al., 2009; Tseng, 2004). Similarly, mainstream parent programming, which often explores the emerging independent relationships of families (Mena & Guardia, 2007), tend to ignore the reality of Latino relations, creating an unattractive educational experience for Latino families who attend.

Parents' ability to influence the educational goals of their students has been widely researched (Auerbach, 2004, 2006; Ceja, 2006; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). For Latino families, discrimination and racism are variables that affect the manner in which these aspirations are transmitted (Ceja, 2006). The lack of faith in the educational system may in some circumstances lead Latino families to transmit diminished aspirations and expectations to their children (Goldengberg et al., 2001). For example, undocumented families' lives are intertwined with conservative policies restricting the access to education and job opportunities. As such, the longer they remain in the U.S. the more they face the repercussions of a racist society, and the more likely they are to develop ambivalent attitudes about the benefits of a formal education (Gildersleeve, 2010; Perez, 2010). Conversely, Latino families also receive their aspirational cues from their students' academic success, often times decreasing when their children are doing poorly in school and increasing when they are doing well (Downs et al., 2008). Similarly, at least in one study, immigrant families reported a high motivation for education, which faded the more their children and they themselves experienced acts of discrimination and racism in school or in their jobs (Gorman & Balter, 1997). Other research (Ceja, 2004) suggested, "the enduring

hope parents have in education as a tool for mobility remains consistently high in spite of discrimination” (p. 340). Thus, Latino families are constantly transmitting high expectations about school to their children by associating educational attainment with a way out of the oppressive cycle for their families. In any case, immigrant families who have high hopes for their children’s educational attainment, many times possess little knowledge about how they could act on those aspirations (Dennis et al., 2005; Perez, 2010). Often, families not only lack the necessary practical information and strategies to intervene in their students’ education, but also hold inaccurate information about college cost, eligibility and planning (Auerbach, 2004).

A final point of complexity for Latino family involvement is found in the manner in which education may be viewed. The cultural construction of education for Latino families is much more holistic than that of White families, encompassing a unique interplay between moral training and academic development—with the former condition being necessary for the development of the latter (Auerbach, 2006; Goldenberg et al., 2001). Incongruence between moral and academic expectations in schools can contribute to lowered satisfaction with the educational system in the US by Latino families (Auerbach, 2006). For example, academically successful students who are morally deficit are often thought of as uneducated students by Latino families, and vice versa. Thus, the perceived role of schools is to develop students academically and morally, with parents taking greater responsibility for moral development and having a more passive role in their students’ academic development (Auerbach, 2006). Furthermore, Latino families tend to view school administrators and staff with the utmost respect (Gorman & Balter, 1997), providing them with a full sense of autonomy in school, and further limiting parental interventions to the home. This concept is in direct contradiction to the idea of parental involvement in the U.S. where parents are expected to engage with teachers and influence the

classroom work and curriculum; many times creating a great disconnect between Latino families and American schools (Wolf et al., 2009).

In addition to these cultural differences in parental involvement, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the educational system, attitudes of school personnel, past educational experiences, and life factors like employment, child care, and transportation all influence the ability for Latino parents to be involved through traditional mainstream methods (Gonzalez, 2002). For many Latino families, unfamiliarity with the written and unwritten rules of schools, results in the construction of education as a threat (Auerbach, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). With these intricacies in mind, this discussion will now contextualize the intersection between the institution and Latino families in the process of student recruitment to college, and student persistence through college.

### **Latino Families' Influence on College Outreach**

As was established earlier in this paper, the high expectations and aspirations Latino parents have for their children, coupled with the limited resources of Latino parents, create unconventional methods of support, which influence the college enrollment process of their children. Accordingly, Latino students cite the amount of encouragement and support offered by parents and other family members as the most important reason for wanting to pursue a college education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Current research identifies three general stages associated with the college choice process: (a) predisposition, (b) search, and (c) selection (Ceja, 2006). The literature focused on students' college choice process suggests that parents have a greater influence on the development of the predisposition stage than that of the search and selection phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For Latino parents, this influence is many times augmented (Ceja, 2006). This section explores the trends in the creation of attitudes towards

attending college for Latino students by Latino parents, as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and intricacies of this influence as they apply to the enrollment of Latino students to college.

An initial understanding of why students attend college can be helpful for practitioners as the initial predisposition for attending higher education has been closely linked to the academic outcomes of students in their first two years of college (Phinney, Dennin, & Osorio, 2006). Messages of support and encouragement from Latino parents are a variable consistently shown to influence college aspirations more so than student ability or social economic status (Auerbach, 2004). Literature on school enrollment identifies five reasons why students choose to enroll in higher education. These reasons include, (a) to assist their families; (b) to prove themselves and their value; (c) because they have received encouragement from others; (d) because they have nothing else to do; and (e) for career and personal development (Phinney et al., 2006). For Latino students as well as other ethnic minority students, the themes of “helping their families” and “proving themselves and their value” were found to be particular influential reasons in their enrollment in college (Phinney et al., 2006, p. 348). Of these two reasons, “attending college to help their family,” was the most strongly endorsed reason for Latino student enrollment (Phinney et al., 2006, p. 348). As discussed previously, since many Latino families express an interdependent psychology, it is logical that students would select helping their family as a primary motive for attending college. The second most common response for students: “to prove themselves and their value,” may also be closely linked to family, as it can be a response to the discrimination Latino families feel, and stimulated through parents’ moral lessons of hard work, resilience, and perseverance (Goldenberg et al., 2002; Phinney et al., 2006, p. 348). Surprisingly, encouragement from others was not listed as one of the main reasons for Latino students enrolling in college. This may be that Latino parents are seen as much more supporters

of their students' educational aspirations rather than promoters or sponsors. This may be in alignment with the way in which Latino families perceive their role in education (Auerbach, 2006). Parents may feel more entitled to support their child's decision to go college, but may feel less confident in advocating for their children's education, which they think is typically the role of school counselors, teachers, and other educational staff.

According to a study on Latino/a college enrollment, the most prevalent barrier to college access for Latino students is lack of knowledge about the steps needed to go to college (Auerbach, 2004). Latino parents, who have high educational aspirations for their children, may also possess erroneous information about the necessary steps to attend college (Lopez, 2010). For example, majority parents who are many times in privileged socioeconomic positions receive information about college from their social networks, which also create support and encouragement for college students. Since the social and economic status of Latino parents may reduce their ties to academic and social networks, their ability to transmit valuable college information is reduced as well (Ceja, 2006). Because of these constraints, the role of parents during the college choice process is often limited to that of only emotional or financial support. Even though this limited parental support showed meaningful results for Latino students, the lack of information held by parents created stressful environments for students which could have been ameliorated through institutional efforts to integrate Latino parents in conversations about college (Auerbach 2004, 2006; Ceja, 2004, 2006).

A research study on Latino college high school students by Ceja (2006) contended that beyond the support provided by parents during the college choice process, students felt a significant component of the college choice process was still absent for them. Further investigation revealed that for Latino students in the study, the ability to use their parents as

information sources was missing altogether from the process (Ceja, 2006). Because of their parents' lack of experience with higher education, students in the study felt a moral obligation to teach and inform their parents about the different aspects of the college choice process. In this sense Latino students had the double task of simultaneously learning about their college options, requirements, financial aid, and scholarships, while also informing and familiarizing their parents with the very same process they were navigating (Downs et al., 2008; Lopez, 2010). The responsibility of learning about the college process is difficult enough, but being able to understand and explain the process to their parents complicates this tension further as students are often doing the job of the institution by bridging the information gap for their parents. Furthermore, students who did not fully understand the enrollment process were then burdened with the task of explaining something unbeknownst to them, creating a frustrating climate for students (Ceja, 2006).

#### **Intervention methods and models of outreach.**

A significant portion of the literature surrounding college enrollment for Latino students is situated around the type of programs and philosophies guiding recruitment programs. Though many parent outreach programs primarily focus on creating institutional buy in from family members (Torres & Marquez, 2005), for Latino parents a more important and relevant component of these programs should concern the development and awareness of parents' cultural assets or capital (Auerbach, 2004). Attaining cultural capital is critical in the support of college-bound students (Perna & Titus, 2005). The existing cultural capital of Latino families can be conceptualized into four broad areas that Tierney and Auerbach (2005) identified as: (a) cultural wealth; (b) cultural integrity; (c) funds of knowledge; and (d) support, emotional, or navigational forms of cultural capital. Each of these potential assets refers to specific investments and

resources arising from Latino homes, assets which college pipeline programs can validate, build upon, and further develop in the goals for college access.

A relatively new concept first explored by Auerbach (2004) advocates for the development of critical capital, specifically referring to the development of a critical understanding of the discrimination faced by Latino families in the United States, and a critique of the social reproduction system maintained by educational and social institutions. Auerbach's (2004) research contended that an exploration of critical capital leads to social action by families to rectify these conditions for their children, which translates into involvement in the school to increase their understanding and navigation of the educational system. This involvement ultimately promotes acquisition of the cultural capital necessary for advocating and helping their students navigate the college enrollment pipeline.

Literature on academic outreach also suggests specific parameters for instituting Latino-focused parent programming at post secondary institutions. Jun and Colyar (2002) conducted extensive research on the development of multicultural parent programs. According to their research, parent programs fall under the range of three program types: (a) translated; (b) culturally adapted; and (c) culturally specific programs. With the exception of linguistic alterations, a translated program is virtually an unchanged parent program catering to dominant parents. These types of programs tend to be the most popular type of programming available to Latino parents due to their relatively low implementation cost, and effort; however they are also the least effective in expanding Latino parents' role in the college enrollment process (Jun & Colyar, 2002; Torres & Marquez, 2005). The second type of programs, the cultural adapted programs—while similar to translated programs—showcase a more visible effort to incorporate the values and traditions of the Latino population by providing (elements of) a culturally

competent program, and/or staff. The third type of program and arguably the most successful is culturally specific programs. These programs acknowledge the cultural contributions, needs, local resources, and community associations of Latinos to present relevant programming specific to the college enrollment pathway of Latino families. Culturally specific programs also instilled a component of parent education meant to provide students with an additional resource for college that in the absence of the program would likely have been less consistent and less informed (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Jun & Colyar, 2002). Additionally, these types of programs are more likely to create a sense of belonging, as well as a welcoming environment for Latino parents demonstrated in their increased attendance and commitment to the program (Tierney & Auerbach 2005; Torres & Marquez, 2005). Undeniably, the greatest benefit of outreaching to Latino parents in college access programs is centered in their potential to become more knowledgeable, committed allies in their students' pursuit of higher education.

### **Latino Families' Influence on College Persistence**

Another potential benefit of working with Latino families is increased student retention. The focus of the following section is not necessarily to investigate Latino student retention; rather, this section is concerned with the literature around how parental and family support facilitates persistence and graduation for Latino students. Historically, the work of Tinto (as cited in Oseguera et al., 2009) has influenced the manner through which institutions of higher education think of retention. Tinto's framework of student retention involves three stages influencing student persistence. First is the separation stage, where students leave—or literally “break away” from—past associations, community and family to transition to the institution (Oseguera et al., 2009). The actual transition is considered the second stage of his model leading to the final stage, the incorporation stage where students acculturate or integrate to the

institution. The manner in which students integrate socially and academically to the institution determines how well students are retained (Oseguera et al., 2009). For Latino students who are interdependently linked to their families, the act of integration into the institution may not be possible as these students remain inherently connected to their communities. According to Tinto's model, Latino students would then be a population at risk for departure. Tinto's model of student retention has been often critiqued for its lack of validation of underrepresented student values (Sanchez et al., 2005). Conversely, many retention scholars have reconceptualized the model to recognize the connection between students, their families, and the institution (Torres, 2004; Zalaquett 2005). These reconceptualized models suggest that Latino students can relate to the institution and persist without "breaking away" or assimilating into a culture that is not their own.

In understanding how Latino families influence student persistence, various researchers have advanced a theory of resiliency (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Zalaquett, 2005). At the heart of this theory, is the idea that resilient students are academically less vulnerable and as such are able to maintain high levels of achievement, motivation, and performance, in spite of sociological, psychological, and institutional conditions that may potentially place them at risk for departure (Ceja, 2004). This theoretical foundation helps frame the importance of family in the persistence of Latino students, as most students attributed the development of their resiliency to their family (Zalaquet, 2005). Findings also suggest that grappling with the economic, social and occupational struggles of Latino families generates a message of resiliency to their children (Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003). Specifically, in many instances, a college education represents a means of escaping and avoiding their parents' economic, social, and educational conditions. This motivation to "escape," coupled with the persistent model in which

Latino families face and surpass life struggles, promotes resiliency within the student. The theoretical framework of resiliency then may offer an explanation of how first-generation Latino students negotiate the social, economic, and cultural forces affecting their higher education experience. Latino parents' influence in the development of resiliency provides Latino students with the ability to manipulate and shape their environment, to deal with its pressures successfully, and to comply with its demands (Ceja, 2004).

Parents and family members have continuously been cited as one of the most significant sources of support for students in the college pipeline (Bank, Biddle, & Slavings 1990; Donovan & Mckelfresh, 2008; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). For Latino students, their success in school is often a manifestation of their parents' expectations and resiliency (Auerbach 2004, 2005; Ceja 2004; 2006), and an expression of the cultural concept of familism (Desmond et al., 2009). Familism is the belief that decisions and actions are intrinsically linked to thoughts that prioritize family over the individual self. This cultural concept is manifested through specific attitudes or behaviors that reflect the collective welfare of Latino families (Desmond et al., 2009). Although there is no empirical data suggesting the impact of familism in education, anecdotal data suggests trends where students may choose the economical well being of their families and prioritize work commitments over educational pursuits (Rodriguez et al., 2003). On the other hand, familism may also explain instances where students continue to attend school in spite of the overwhelming challenges (Sanchez et al., 2005). In the same manner, this concept of familism explains why some parents may inadvertently continue to expect the same type of support from their children in spite of the increased responsibilities of college, often times creating a conflicting environment for the student (Yazedjian, Toews, & Navarro, 2009). The increased likelihood of Latino students living at home during their college education also

increases the chances of students being forced to fulfill familial obligations, and self-imposing restrictions conditioned by their family's needs, which may detract students from their academic obligations (Desmond et al., 2009). Even Latino students motivated to succeed in college as a way to provide for their families may experience pressure to finish early or to choose a technical career, which may add new challenges and complications to students' persistence (Torres, 2004).

The family as an institution has the magnitude to be both oppressive and protective agent for Latino college students (Wolf et al., 2009). It is for this reason that connecting families to the work of persistence should be a critical component of any college retention program. The integration of Latino families in the work of retention, however, should be practiced only after thoroughly developing an understanding of the complexity of Latino families (Rodriguez et al., 2003). For example, even though Latino students may face conflicting responsibilities by staying at home during college, it may also be economically and emotionally advantageous to live at home. By living at home, Latino families provide students with a supportive network of security and with a constant source of cultural nourishment that many times sustains them through the racism and discrimination students face in college, especially in predominantly White institutions (Banks et al., 1990; Jarama Alvan, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996; Sanchez et al., 2005). By this logic students can easily be pulled into competing directions. At one end, there may be an expectation to move away from home by dominant and popular cultural values that stress independence; while on the other end, students may be pulled to stay at home to uphold familial ties that nourish, validate, and sustain their identity. For Latinos and other ethnic minority students, studies show that those secure in their identity are more likely to persist in college (Jarama Alvan et al., 1996; Jun & Colyar, 2002), for many Latino students, families are the primary entities responsible for nourishing a sense of confidence in their ethnic background

(Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Perna & Titus, 2005).

Given the large ambiguous space families inhabit within the context of retention, it becomes even more urgent for higher education to conceptualize Latino parent education and partnership as an integral and intentional component of their retention programs. Intervention from higher education may diminish the capacity for Latino families to complicate their students' pathway in college, while also increasing the likelihood for appreciation of the college student experience (Auerbach, 2004; Yazedjian et al., 2009). Research has found that programs that move beyond the superficial inclusion of family culture, to invest in the notion of cultural representation utilizing the students' racial, ethnic, and familial background in the development of pedagogies and learning activities, are more likely to establish results leading to retention and eventually graduation (Jun & Colyar, 2002). Family is a variable all too often ignored in the work of retention and transition specialists; but the research presented in this section provides evidence of the critical role families have in the retention as well as the attrition of Latino students. It is important to note, however, that family validation, integration, and support is necessary but not sufficient enough for Latino student success (Sanchez et al., 2005). Rather, it should be an element of a holistic student support plan promoting the success of underrepresented students.

### **Summary**

One aspect of deficit thinking that persists is the belief that parents of color typically do not value the importance of education and seldom participate in the education of their children (Downs et al., 2008). With statistical trends showing the number of Latino students enrolling and persisting through college declining, a number of explanations have held Latino families responsible for the failure of their students (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gorman & Balter,

1997). Historically, the role of families in the success of their children has shifted as the policies, laws, and culture of higher education have changed, often privileging and recognizing the involvement of White affluent parents (Donovan & McKelfresh, 2008). For Latino families who share a unique context of oppression in the United States, the ways in which they are involved are vastly distinct from the mainstream, encompassing a unique moral standpoint, as well as a unique way of supporting their students grounded in messages of resiliency, motivation, higher education aspirations, and moral integrity and cultural nourishment (Auerbach, 2004, 2006; Banks et al., 1990; Ceja, 2004, 2006; Jarama Alvan, Belgrave, & Zea, 1996; Sanchez et al., 2005). Higher education leadership can build from these values, and maximize the benefits of the Latino family composition.

The manner in which Latino parents interact with their students and the unique way in which they offer support for students in the educational pipeline have direct implications for college outreach and retention efforts. The literature presented in this analysis contends that parents have a huge influence on Latino students. Although in some instances, parents' lack of knowledge about the college process may initially complicate students' college choice process, overwhelmingly the support provided by parents has been cited as one of the main reasons for the success of Latino students in higher education (e.g., Auerbach, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Interventions from culturally specific and representative college programs are necessary in order to maximize the support of Latino families. Partnerships that seek to empower Latino families by validating their cultural capital, removing barriers for participation, and by adopting a cultural interdependence lens, are more likely to have positive effects influencing Latino student success in the higher education pipeline (Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

### **Implications of the Literature**

Based on each of the premises reviewed in the literature analysis, a number of recommendations can be implemented to procure the full benefits of Latino families' participation in higher education, ultimately leading to student success. These recommendations include: (a) adopting new ways of thinking and attitudes about Latino families; (b) incorporating programmatic elements to outreach and retention efforts in alignment with the value Latino families have in the success of their children; and (c) development of an assessment plan when working with Latino families.

For practitioners, the work with Latino parents has to begin with a declaration of the importance of fostering alliances with the families of Latino students (Donovan & MacKelfresh, 2008; Hill & Torres, 2010). Parent relation offices must be aware of the highly diverse families they are charged to serve, and should provide programming sensitive to the needs of its diverse constituents. In the same manner, they should seek out opportunities to further educate themselves on the complexity of Latino families, and on the manner in which families have been involved in their students' educational success (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Hill & Torres, 2010). Given the uncertainty and lack of trust some Latino families may have towards the educational system, it is important that institutions establish recurring communications, programs, and efforts inspiring a sense of commitment on behalf of the institution, rather than isolated one-time events (Jun & Colyar, 2002). For Latino communities, this may include culturally specific programming cognizant of the unique position afforded to Latino families in the United States. Practitioners should be aware of the unwavering source of support Latino families give their students, and utilize this knowledge to maximize the family's capacity to act as protective agents in the higher education pipeline. Institutional leadership should reject beliefs that view Latino

families as hindrances in the success of Latino students, and rather understand the social and political context through which these families exist, and work to remove barriers that may further alienate the Latino community.

More efforts should be made by college outreach programs working with Latino students to integrate parent education, community partnerships, and culturally relevant discourse. Some of the most successful family programs highlighted in the literature were culturally relevant for the needs of Latino families (Auerbach, 2004; Jun & Colyar, 2002). The creation of trust through pre-established relationships, informational transparency, previous communications, and through a genuine attempt to remove institutional barriers for involvement, can ameliorate some of the anxiety families may feel towards the college choice process. In addition, establishing partnerships with community agencies, school districts, or local schools can also help institutions access families, as well as leverage funding (Torres & Marquez, 2005).

In alignment with Epstein and Sanders' (2000) model of overlapping spheres discussed earlier in this paper, a challenge for student affairs leadership will be coordinating the efforts of Latino families and the institution in their respective goals for student success. Therefore, a component of parental education needs to be attached to the work with Latino families expounding information related to access to higher education such as financial aid information, high school graduation requirements, course and career selection, university admission requirements, and information on the college experience. Because of the internal psychology of Latino families (Tseng, 2004), a good method to implement when conveying this information that ensures the cultural integrity of participants (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005) can be found in the use of testimonies from Latino families who have prior experiences with higher education. Lastly, part of a culturally relevant education curriculum for Latino families, should involve an

exploration of the present institutional inequities, and social reproduction systems affecting their experience in the United States (Auerbach, 2004), empowering parents to dismantle the very same systems of oppression that influence their involvement in education and their children's success.

In a similar manner, college retention and transition specialists should be aware of the influence Latino families employ over their students already enrolled in college. Because Latino college students report above average contact with their parents (Wolf et al., 2009), it is critical that universities take steps to educate Latino families about the resources available to college students creating opportunities for academic intervention at the home. This awareness can be expressed through (a) programs that facilitate family integration and education; (b) dialogues with students that validate their family's resiliency, sacrifices, and support; (c) and through invitations for parental involvement at the higher education level. Creating individualized programming for Latino families, such as orientations or welcome week events, can serve as venues for this college-specific information to be distributed, including information on career aspirations, graduation requirements, graduate degrees, student development, and academic resources. Furthermore, parent relation programs and universities in general should work towards boosting the efficacy of Latino families rather than alienating their cultural assets, by developing broader family oriented conceptualizations of student retention (Rodriguez et al. 2003; Sanchez et al., 2005). Finally, advisors, counselors, and other retention specialists should anticipate some of the problems that may arise for Latino students as they negotiate changing relationships and cultural contradictions with their families, and provide culturally relevant interventions cognizant of the manner through which Latino students connect to institutions, the role families play in this process, and the cultural assets students bring with them to higher

education (Auerbach, 2004, 2006; Ceja, 2004, 2006).

The creation and development of ongoing assessment tools to measure the knowledge and development of families is one final holistic recommendation for practitioners. Given the large decreases in budgets, assessment has become a critical tool for determining the effectiveness and improvement of our programs. Generally, very little assessment data exists around Latino parent programs. A comprehensive assessment plan when working with Latino parents should focus on collecting pre and post survey data, designed to measure parent needs, and satisfactions. As much as possible longitudinal assessments should be conducted to track the college enrollment and success of students involved in Latino parent outreach and retention efforts. Finally, Latino parents should also be involved in the development of assessment tools. The creation of assessment plans for Latino parents should be a collaborative process where parents themselves determine what is important for them to learn as they assist their students through the higher education pipeline.

### **Limitations and Future Study**

While the implications of this research provide higher education institutions with a framework to better integrate Latino parents in outreach and persistence efforts, limitations of this research merit further consideration. First, the scope of this paper was on traditional two-parent Latino households, yet, national trends indicate an increase in single parent homes (Jun & Colyar, 2002). The experience of single parents is often marked by lack of resources, and competing interests that may further obfuscate the manner and method through which they interact with their children and with institutions of higher education. Similarly, it is also worth exploring how applicable these implications are to multiracial Latino homes, LGBT domestic unions, families where an older sibling has already attended college, and immigrant families with

American born children. Further analysis should also be done on how gender impacts the parent-child relationship, as female and male students have specific roles to uphold in many Latino families and hence may experience gender specific messages and pressures. The degree in which families accept or resist acculturation—or assimilation—into the dominant culture may also influence these findings (Jarama Alvan et al., 1996). Finally, a growing body of literature (Rodriguez et al., 2003; Sanchez et al., 2005) also suggests that Latino students' concept of family also encompasses extended family, close personal friendships, and intimate relationships, all adding a level of depth to the implications presented in this analysis, particularly for student retention.

### **Conclusion**

I started this integrated paper with a reflection of my past observations with parent programming at the higher education level. Throughout this research, I envisioned a new way of supporting Latino students that focuses on bridging the divide between higher education institutions and Latino families. As I continue to work in the field of student recruitment and student retention, the information presented here will not only guide the manner through which I interact with other Latino students, but also the manner through which student affairs professionals interact with students when assisting them in their goals for college enrollment and success. Given the immense cultural importance of family in the lives of Latino students, integrating parent education and support into the work of student affairs professionals should not just be a conventional intervention, but rather an imperative component of outreach and retention efforts.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term Latino/a refers to both men and women from various Latin American, European, and Caribbean Island communities. Latina/o includes (both native U.S. or foreign born) individuals who self-identify with the following geographic regions: Mexico, Central America, South America, Spain, Portugal, and the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. When referring to the entire population as a whole, the term Latino or Latinos is exclusively used in this paper in congruence with the Spanish language's grammatical rules. The term Latino is also encompassing of the Hispanic, and Chicano/a identities.

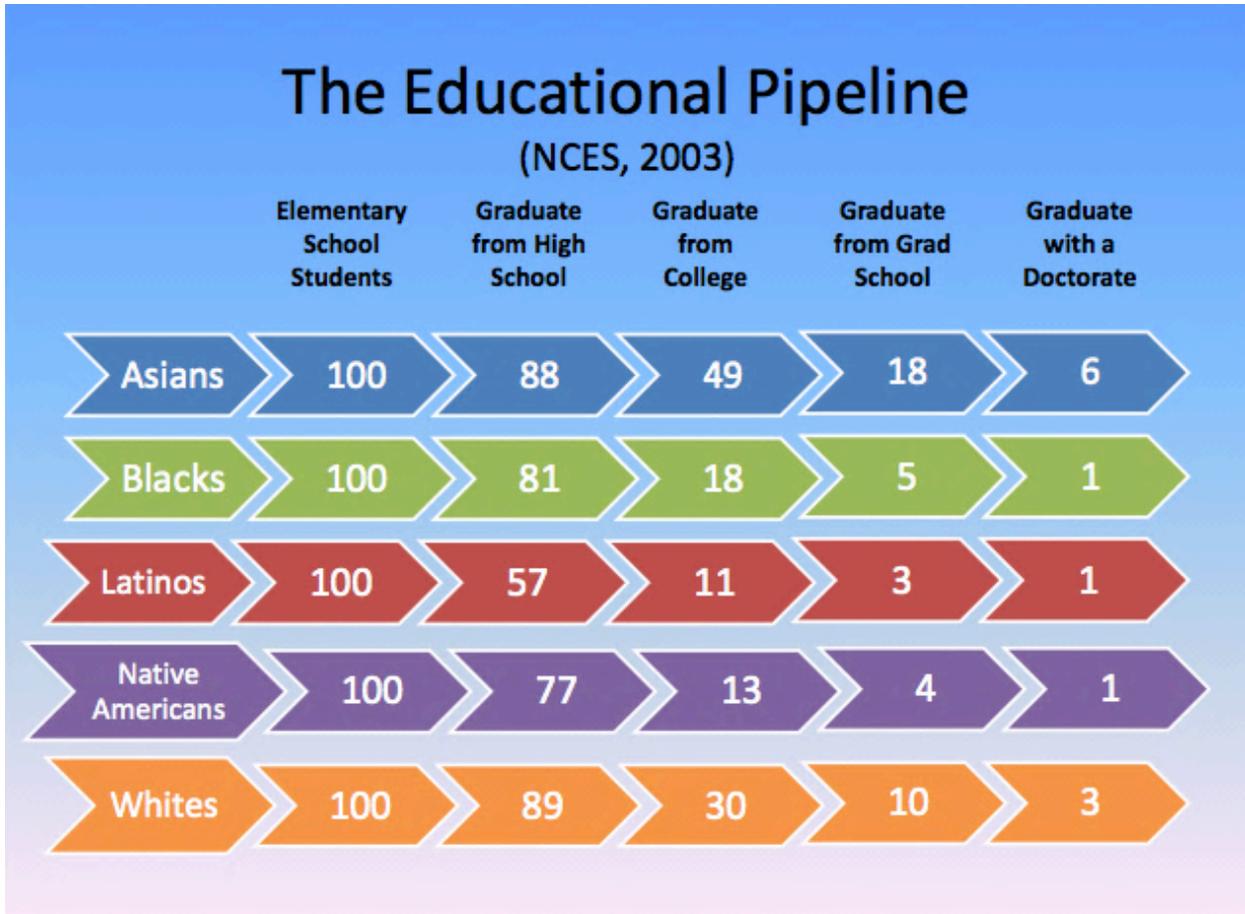
<sup>2</sup> Undocumented individuals include individuals born outside of the United States, and who reside here without the legal permission of the federal government. Many of these students and their families entered the country legally through tourist or work visas and chose to stay in the United States after their visas expired. Others entered without any form of documentation. Many undocumented youth have been residing in the United States for many years, if not almost their whole lives. It is important to also note that being undocumented reflects an experience of certain immigrants in this county and not necessarily an identity tied to the Latino community.

Table 1

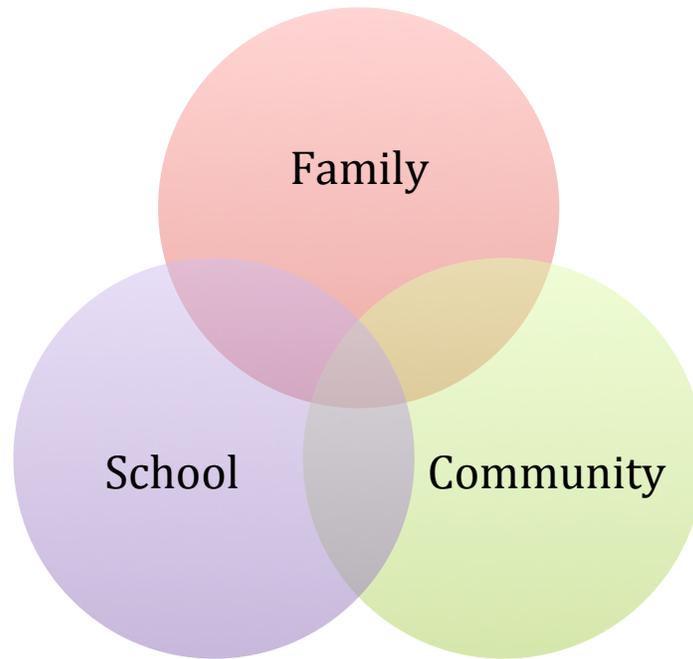
Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2009

 <b>Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2009</b>				
<b>Table 1. Population, by Race and Ethnicity: 2000 and 2009</b>				
Universe: 2000 and 2009 resident population				
	<b>2009 population</b>	<b>2000 population</b>	<b>Percent, 2009</b>	<b>Percent, 2000</b>
Hispanic	48,348,144	35,204,480	15.7	12.5
Native born	30,278,868	21,072,230	9.9	7.5
Foreign born	18,069,276	14,132,250	5.9	5.0
White alone, not Hispanic	199,327,245	194,527,123	64.9	69.1
Black alone, not Hispanic	37,178,119	33,706,554	12.1	12.0
Asian alone, not Hispanic	13,604,863	10,088,521	4.4	3.6
Other, not Hispanic	8,548,185	7,895,228	2.8	2.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>307,006,556</b>	<b>281,421,906</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Note: "Other, not Hispanic" includes persons reporting single races not listed separately and persons reporting more than one race Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of 2000 Census (5% IPUMS) and 2009 American Community Survey (1% IPUMS)				

*Note.* The large growth of Latinos is visible by the percentage growth of the Hispanic population from 2000 to 2009. Within this demographic the number of Latinos born outside of the United States, constitutes a significant portion of the overall Latino population.



*Figure 1.* A representation of the educational pipeline for the five major racial groups of the United States. Utilizing the statistical rates of graduation, and persistence rates, this research tracked the educational journey of 100 students through elementary, secondary school, undergraduate, graduate school, and the doctorate pathways. Where as the educational funnel decreases for each racial group at each of these points, Latino students experience the highest attrition rates, and lowest graduation rates out of all of the racial groups.



*Figure 2.* The overlapping spheres of influence between family, school, and community have implications for student learning and success. The figure demonstrates the importance of family in the success and education of students. This model states that schools, the community and the family are all accountable for student learning and success. Although each of these spheres possess their own unique methods to promote student success, it is important to note that the overlap in the figure signifies the interdependency between each of these entities. Attempts to increase student success are more beneficial when school, family, and community are all working together towards this goal. Thus placing the student and student success at the center of this figure, where all three spheres converge. This convergence only happens, however through coordinated efforts and communication by all three spheres.