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Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

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Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

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Latinx students continue to enroll in U.S. higher education in much greater numbers than in previous decades (Gramlich, 2017). Therefore, it is no wonder that “since 2006, we have seen a 78 percent increase in the number of institutions classified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions¹, and a growing number of Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions,” the majority of which are two-year community colleges (*Excelencia & HACU*, 2017, para. 3). Latinx students represent 23% of community college students nationwide (AACC, 2017). Upon completing high school, 46% of Latinx students enroll in the community college sector (Krogstad & Lopez, 2015). Moreover, when compared to White students, Latinx students are more likely to choose a community college, even after controlling for academic achievement and socioeconomic status (Kurlaender, 2006; Tovar, 2015).

Even so, structural and institutional barriers continue to interrupt Latinx students’ postsecondary pathways, oftentimes forcing them to leave college without reaching their academic goals. When entering the community college system, approximately 51% of Latino/a/x students aspire to transfer to a four-year college, but less than 6% will earn a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrollment (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Sheperd, 2010). Ultimately, 35% of Latino/a/x who earn a bachelor’s degree begin their education at the community college and are transfer students, which is the highest among other racial groups (Cataldi et al., 2011).

¹ HSIs are defined in Title V of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) as accredited, degree-granting, public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment. Emerging HSIs have a 15-24% full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate Hispanic student enrollment.

Although the community college has been established as an instrumental institution that can both support and hinder the experiences of Latinx students as they navigate postsecondary education (Moore & Shulock 2010; Núñez & Elizondo, 2013; Pérez Huber, Malagon, Ramirez, Camargo Gonzalez, Jimenez, & Velez, 2015), the community college continues to be an under-researched sector of postsecondary education. Accordingly, we sought to propose a special issue focused on Latinx² students and the community college with the aim to publish studies that promote pathways to postsecondary degrees.

When developing the call and special issue, we considered three guiding questions: What are the experiences of leaders, instructors, and students when promoting pathways to postsecondary degrees for Latinx students? How do scholars and practitioners challenge deficit structures and practices in the community college? What transformative changes (structural, attitudinal, processes) are needed to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Latinx students at the community college?

Faced with multiple challenges, U.S. community colleges are complex organizations to lead (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Eddy, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). For instance, community college leaders must uphold multiple missions (Eddy 2012; Wood & Nevarez, 2014), which include developmental education, community education, transfer education, and vocational/career and technical education (CTE). To address the four functions, community college leaders and faculty must respond to the nation's developmental education crisis (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, & Solorzano, 2014; Bailey, 2009) and address low completion and transfer rates (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). In addition, community college leaders must contend with dwindling, insufficient, and shifting revenue streams (Cohen et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010) while (re)building relationships with board members (Smith, 2016) and operating within a culture of increased accountability (Eddy, 2010, 2012). Additionally, a number of community college leaders and faculty now face decisions centered on the added role of conferring baccalaureate degrees (Martinez, 2014; McKinney, Scicchitano, & Johns, 2013).

² Although there are varying viewpoints regarding the use of the “x” signifier in “Latinx,” as guest editors we purposefully chose to employ the “x” signifier in an attempt to achieve inclusivity and challenge the existing gender binary. For a detailed view into the ongoing discussion regarding the use of the “x” signifier, see M. de Onis (2017).

Within this context, we frame the community college as a sector that can both facilitate college access for Latinx students and institutionalize obstacles to completion efforts. Nevertheless, the community college represents a sector that students, faculty, and leaders navigate and challenge institutional obstacles to bridge degree aspirations with completions. Latinx communities across the United States enact varied forms of social and political agency and claim authority to assert their voices through organizing and knowledge sharing. We see this collective sense of strength and resilience in the actions of Latinx who create new spaces from which to enact change. This issue provides a forum to scholarship that addresses the national imperative of the growing Latinx community college student population, as well as the possibilities present in college aspirations and persistence.

The issue begins with the institutional perspective in, “Supporting Latinx/a/o community college leaders: A geospatial approach” in which Ignacio Hernández focuses on institutional leaders who are members of one community college professional association. Using data from an original survey instrument and an exploratory spatial data analysis (ESDA), Hernández uses a geographic information systems (GIS) database and finds that Latinx community college leaders may be found in metropolitan areas with large Latinx/a/o populations. The geo-spatial results of this study offer significant contributions to regional efforts in the identification and preparation of the next generation of leaders to transform and strengthen community colleges as pathways to degrees for Latinx/a/o students. In addition, Hernández posits the powerful notion that the competencies established by the American Association of Community Colleges alone are an ineffective framework to guide leaders towards broadening pathways to degrees for Latinx/a/o students.

The focus on institutional accountability continues in “Chicanas in IR: Data-driven advocacy for Latinx students from institutional research contexts in the community college,” by Elvira J. Abrica and Martha Rivas. The authors use *testimonio* methodology as institutional research (IR) professionals to examine how they experience, respond to, and challenge institutionalized racism and systemic obstacles as they advocate for Latinx students in the California Community College system. In particular, the article offers a critique of the pillar of neutrality associated with institutional research and calls for a critical examination of the ways in which IR may support the perpetuation and/or dismantling of educational inequities in community college.

The special issue continues with a focus on faculty members and their role in supporting Latinx student success in an article titled, “Connecting through engagement: Latinx student-faculty interaction in community college,” authored by Felisha A. Herrera, Judith W. Hernández Chapar, and Gabriela Kovats Sánchez. While previous research has focused on the engagement experiences of students enrolled at four-year institutions, it often excludes the experiences of Latinx students enrolled at two-year public institutions. In the article, the authors center faculty as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and examine the formal and informal contacts between faculty and Latinx students. Using data from the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Survey, the authors employ descriptive analyses and blocked hierarchical regression to understand the factors that impact the frequency of interaction with institutional agents for Latinx students.

The issue proceeds by examining the student-level experiences in an article titled “Latino men and their fathers: Exploring how community cultural wealth influences their community college success,” written by Victor B. Sáenz, Carmen de las Mercedes, Sarah L. Rodriguez, and Claudia García-Louis. In their article, the authors share findings from a qualitative study that examined the role of fathers in the educational success of Latino men attending community colleges. Using community cultural wealth as a framework, the experiences of 130 Latino men enrolled in Texas community colleges are highlighted. The following article, “Latina student mothers *trenzas de identidades* in the community college,” authored by Hortencia Jimenez and Nereida Oliva, provides insights into the experiences of Latina community college students who are mothers. The authors examine the narratives of four Latina student mothers enrolled in a community college. Using Chicana feminist theory as their theoretical framework, the authors apply *trenzas de identidades* (Godínez, 2006; Montoya, 1994) as a metaphorical and analytical tool to understand the experiences of Latina community college student mothers.

In efforts to dismantle pervasive educational inequities exacerbated by existing policies and practices related to developmental education, Erin Doran contributes an article titled “An empowerment framework for Latinx students in developmental education.” In the article, Doran provides an overview of the literature related to Latinx students in developmental writing and highlights understudied areas. Doran proposes a framework for Latinx students as a model, which combines a deeper understanding of language, power, and preparing Latinx

students for college-level writing. In the final research article, “Mexican and Mexican-American student reflections on transfer: Institutional agents and the continued role of the community college,” Edén Cortez and Erin L. Castro draw upon the experiences of six Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students to examine students’ reflections regarding pre- and post-transfer support from both institutional agents and structured student programs.

The issue continues with conference proceedings, which entail the speech made by Eloy Ortiz Oakley, Chancellor of the California Community Colleges during the 2017 Latino Education & Advocacy Days (LEAD) Summit. As the first Latino to lead the largest higher education system in the United States, Chancellor Oakley is a passionate and unapologetic advocate for Latinx students. Since his appointment, Chancellor Oakley has been instrumental in reframing deficit thinking aimed at Latinx students and continues to work arduously to address equity gaps. While fully aware of the “depressing statistics” regarding Latino students in higher education, Chancellor Oakley emphasizes the role of California Community Colleges in improving educational outcomes of Latinx communities, many of which are Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Related to this point, Oakley underscores the need for Hispanic-Serving Institutions, often times more appropriately referred to as Hispanic-Enrolling Institutions, to become *Hispanic-Graduating* Institutions. In addition, Chancellor Oakley addresses questions related to the institutionalization of baccalaureate degrees at the community college as well as transformative policies to promote equity and justice within developmental education.

In alignment with Chancellor Oakley’s speech, Martha Rivas’s poem, entitled “A Real Tragedy,” provides insight into the challenges experienced by Latinx students in the community college and the institutional obstacles that leaders must address. Finally, Madeline Pérez De Jesús provides a book review for *Hanging out and hanging on: From the projects to the campus* (Núñez, 2014). Pérez De Jesús provides a critical review of *Hanging Out*, where Núñez (2014) discusses the use of institutional partnerships to address college access and affordability. In particular, the book examines the implications of a program that serves students who may not be excelling academically but have a commitment to their communities. In the program, students take courses at the community college and are housed near the campus, which minimizes the stigma associated with attending community college.

As editors, it is our hope that the collection of articles featured in this special issue continue to engage us to think critically about the role of community colleges in advancing Latinx students in higher education. We thank the *AMAE* Editorial Team, for their support of this work. In addition, we thank all the volunteer reviewers for their careful and critical reviews. Finally, we thank the contributing authors for engaging in this critical line of work while adopting various methodological approaches and asset-based frameworks. We urge scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike to consider the recommendations offered in these works in order to advance policies and practices that help Latinx students not simply enter postsecondary education, but, in fact, achieve and surpass academic goals. Moreover, we encourage readers to consider the areas for future research highlighted by each author. At the same time, we want to stress the need to shift or reframe the discussion about increasing Latinx educational attainment from that of an economic imperative, to a social justice concern. Our students are more than just workers who will play a vital role in raising the country's economic prospects and global competitiveness. They are people with hopes and aspirations for themselves, their families, and their communities. These aspirations often begin at home and include earning a college degree. It is our intention that this special issue contribute to ensuring that deficit educational structures do not temper and/or crush these aspirations.

In sum, although we have made strides toward expanding access and opportunities for Latinx students in the community college, much work remains. In particular, this issue does not include research that addresses the experiences of Latinx student veterans, Latinx students with (dis)abilities, LGBTQ Latinx students, Latinx students who are undocumented, and other intersectional identities. We encourage scholars whose work centers on the aforementioned areas to consider *AMAE* as an outlet to disseminate their work. There is no denying that the current U.S. social, political, and economic context, full of extraordinary vitriol and divisiveness, threatens the progress we have made toward improving the representation of Latinx students in all sectors of postsecondary education. Now more than ever it is time for our scholarship, teaching, and service to speak truth to power and tear down the walls—both literally and figuratively.

Guest Editors

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