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## What Factors Impact First-Generation Latinx Students' Bachelor's Degree Attainment?

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WHAT FACTORS IMPACT FIRST-GENERATION LATINX STUDENTS' BACHELOR'S  
DEGREE ATTAINMENT?

by

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2021

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THESIS

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And lastly, to all the first-generation college students, work hard, dream, believe and never give up. Hardship, struggle and all those barriers you will break through will deepen your value for education and life.

## **Abstract**

Latinxs are one of the fastest-growing minority populations in the United States. The population faces serious challenges in education. There is a considerable shortfall in their educational attainment. As the American economy continues to become more knowledge-based, a college degree becomes more essential in order to be competitive in the workforce. By 2050, Latinxs will account for almost one-third of the U.S. workforce. The Latinx low educational attainment highlights the importance of supporting students while pursuing a bachelor's degrees. By supporting Latinxs in higher education, one supports the development of the country's workforce.

Knowing that Latinxs are not completing bachelor's degrees at the same rate as other ethnic groups formulated my approach toward this thesis. There is a clear disconnect between Latinxs and attainment in higher education. This thesis will examine the literature within the areas of attainment, retention, financial factors, and cultural experiences. Thus, this thesis synthesizes what researchers have identified as factors affecting Latinx's baccalaureate attainment.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

I was in 7th grade when I learned the terms higher education and bachelor's degree. My English teacher recommended me for a college prep program that paved the foundation and meaning for my future. I was exposed to college visits, learned about career fields, and understood the benefits of attaining a degree. For someone like me, a first-generation Latinx<sup>1</sup> teenager from the south-central region of El Paso, Texas, educational hopes often end with a high school degree. A small percentage of students with my background, first-generation, Latinx, queer, barrio raised - will receive a post-secondary degree of any sorts (Liu, 2011). Student attainment represents the measurement of the highest level of education that an individual has completed (Seidman, 2012). On a personal level, attainment represents the promise of educational equity and equality for all first-generation Latinx students.

Growing up, I was fortunate to have mentors and educators who saw potential in me; people who supported me through my transition and journey in higher education. I am the first in my family to graduate from high school and complete a bachelor's degree, a first-generation college student by definition (Gariott, 2019). The United States had over 15 million students enrolled in higher education, 4.5 million first-generation low-income students are represented within that total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). As a first-generation student, I have experienced financial, social, and educational barriers. I understand first-hand how Latinx students struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Latinx is the representation of gender inclusivity of Latin American people while understanding their origin and descent in addition to recognizing the intersections between sexuality, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture and phenotype (Salinas, 2020).



and stop-out<sup>2</sup> or drop out of higher education and, most importantly, their academic journeys. I am privileged in the sense that I understand how the higher education system is difficult to navigate. As a graduate student my goal is to learn about educational systems and how to become a stronger advocate for minority students. As a professional, my philosophy is to support underrepresented students in their bachelor's degree completion. Over 60 percent of Latinx students graduate from high school and, on average, about 60 percent of those students enroll in a post-secondary institution after graduation (Liu, 2011). Additionally, approximately 36 percent of those students will graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years (p. 4). Understanding these facts drive and motivate me to support students and hold difficult conversations about the importance of access and completion with university leaders and policy makers.

I began working for the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) the second semester of my freshman year, seven years ago now. Originally my goal was to pursue a career in communications; however, through my on-campus student employment I steered myself into a career in education. Working with students was a passion that developed innately; I discovered this passion through service and supporting students like myself. Throughout my time as a university staff member, I have learned about many topics, been exposed to many opportunities, and met students from various walks of life. While UTEP exemplifies excellence in providing access to Latinxs while recognizing the importance of representation and support for student access, UTEP also has high attrition rates like many other Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) (Excelencia In Education, 2018). UTEP is a commuter campus in the El Paso, TX and CD. Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico border region, where over 80 percent of the student population is of

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<sup>2</sup> “The term stop-out is used when a student decides college isn’t working out for them at a certain period of time in their life. Their solution to that is to discontinue their education for a semester or two only to return when it is more convenient” (Ohanian, 2013).

Mexican and Latin American descent. This region is unique, as very few universities have this sort of population compared to other parts of the country. UTEP enrolls some of the highest Latinx populations and awards degrees to students at higher rates than any other HSI in the country (Excelencia In Education, 2018).

In the early 2000s, less than 10 percent of Latinx students had completed a four-year degree (Nora & Crisp, 2009). Recently, less than 20 percent have a higher education degree. Within the last two decades, bachelor's degree completion for Latinxs has had only a minor 10 percent attainment growth. Carnevale and Fasules (2017) believe a bachelor's degree provides several benefits, such as lower unemployment and poverty rates, better working conditions, and overall improved health. Adults with higher levels of education are also more likely to move up in the socioeconomic ladder. They are also less likely to rely on public assistance as they break away from the cycle of poverty that is embedded within low funded, underrepresented communities (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2016).

This thesis project is a review of the literature that looks at the factors that hinder Latinx bachelor's degree attainment. As part of a systematic literature review, I will first discuss the research that illustrates the obstacles that prevent degree attainment. Next, I will synthesize the themes that will be connected with the identified factors of attainment within the literature review. In conclusion this thesis will then present possible methods of interventions and support for first-generation students. According to Liu (2011), Latinx students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower educational aspirations since they lack the ability and resources to persist through challenges encountered in their academic journey (p. 3). About 50 percent of Latinx who enroll in college are the first in their families to do so, and one-third of Latinx undergraduates continue to live at home while they attend college (p. 3). Personally, I

understand the importance of receiving a postsecondary degree. It has allowed me to fully realize who I am and what careers I could pursue. Many students who share a similar background to mine, dream of being doctors, nurses, educators, community leaders, businesspeople, artists, and other professions. Having a degree provides a foundation for lifelong success. Many students face challenges that limit their potential and cut their dreams short.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Attainment:* The measurement of the highest level of education that an individual has completed (Seidman, 2012).

*Completion:* The measure between the start of an academic program and its ending towards graduation; whereas, attainment measures the academic progress and continuation (Seidman, 2012).

*First-Generation:* A first-generation college student is defined as a student who has not yet completed a degree in higher education and is the first person in the family to be working towards a degree. According to Gariott (2019), students with parents who have not completed a bachelor's degree or have a background in higher education are at a disadvantage compared to their continuing-generation peers - continuing-generation college students with at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or a higher level of educational attainment (Redford, Ralph, & Hoyer, 2017). First-generation students may share similar qualities amongst themselves. Darling and Smith (2007, p. 204) highlight the following traits:

1. They tend to be from low income families
2. They tend to be members of racial or ethnic minority groups
3. They are most likely to be female than male
4. They tend to have lower college entrance examination scores

5. They tend to be less prepared academically for college
6. They perceive that they are lacking support from those at home, including family and friends.

*Latinx:* To be inclusive, the paper will refer to descendants from Latin America as Latinx. The term Latinx has been adopted to represent nontraditional binary populations within the United States. Latinx is intended to be inclusive of various Spanish-speaking groups and recognize their background, sex, gender, gender identity, and geographic location (Santos, 2017).

*Retention:* Is defined as the ability to stay enrolled until the completion of a degree, thus, related to attainment, considering the cumulative achievements of a student in higher education (Seidman, 2012).

*Persistence:* The enrollment headcount of any cohort compared to its headcount on its initial official census date. The goal is to measure the number of students who persist term to term and to completion (Voigt and Hundrieser, 2008).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The upcoming section will review the literature that examines the factors that hinder Latinx bachelor's degree attainment. The factors include educational background, socio-economic background, cultural, social capital and identity, and student support strategies. There are several factors that hinder Latinx students from graduating with a four-year degree. These factors have affected multiple generations of students and are still present. In this literature review, I will explore how the themes and topics within the academic discourse of Latinx educational attainment illustrate the concerning statistics and their underrepresentation in higher education. I synthesize how the literature examines both practices and theories behind attainment to address how Latinxs are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States, yet they are the least likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

### **Methods of Research and Analysis**

The method used was a narrative review that follows the tradition of critically appraising and summarizing the literature (Hemingway & Brereton, 2009). Specifically, I reviewed scholarly literature to understand bachelor's degree attainment factors among first generation Latinx students. As recommended by Rhoades (2011), various steps were taken to conduct the systematic review: defining the topic, identifying related information using inclusion and exclusion criteria and keywords, conducting a literature review, screening all and excluding irrelevant materials, scrutinizing relevant materials, extracting data and developing evidence synthesis, and determining whether there were sufficient materials. Because Shank and Villella (2004) asserted that a review should also be focused on a specific time period, 2010–2021 was selected, as it corresponds with or provides recent and relevant findings that can supplement the

research question. Prominent and related peer-reviewed journals were identified using the terms and phrases, retention such as attainment, Latinx, bachelors, Latinx bachelor attainment, first-generation bachelor success, Latino/a bachelor attainment, degree completion among Latinx students and other similar search terms as criteria. Collected items were then examined to understand the background and history of student success for Latinx in bachelor's degree attainment. Based upon personal and professional expertise, reasonable judgments were made (Jones, 2004). Ultimately, the narrative review of the appropriate documents and scholarly literature revealed five salient themes: educational background, financial, socio-economic, culture, and identity. In the following section, I include my systematic review of the literature. Specifically, I use the following guidelines to write the literature review:

1. Define the objective of the review and form the research question
2. Develop a methodology for the review and define eligibility for sources
3. Collect literature
4. Evaluate collected literature based on identified factors of attainment
5. Characterization of the literature and cross examine for review
6. Write a synthesis of the results and present research

### **Educational Attainment**

Throughout this review of the research literature, a majority of the sources touched upon or alluded to attainment. At their core, completion and attainment are connected to retention, yet they are not interchangeable. Attainment is a measure of the highest level of education that individuals have completed; while, completion is a measure of how many people finish the programs they started. Attainment focuses on the bachelor's degree awarded to a selected demographic population for example on age, region, or for this purpose ethnic group, while

completion interprets the rate, and or percentage of how Latinxs have finished a degree. Understanding the difference allowed me to develop a sense of awareness in the research. Primarily, retention for me means the idea of completion since, from my personal and academic perspective and experience, completing means success. While retention connects to degree completion, attainment underlines the collective accomplishment of receiving a degree through a varied interpretation of retention and persistence. Personally, I connect with this section because it allows me to fully develop that awareness to grasp the concepts I am researching, and in a way connect the factors together as I read and wrote the review.

Seidman (2012) defines attainment as a realization of a career aspiration for both parents and students, faculty and staff often refer to attainment as a student's ability to complete a degree within four years Seidman, also explored how attainment ultimately is an indicator for an institution's ability to support a student's completion and academic performance. He examined three precollege influences in degree attainment: institutional, individual, and environmental. The variables within the precollege influences indicate grades, gender, ethnicity, parental income, and education determine if a student applies or even enrolls into higher education. Latinx students' social cultural norms can shape a student's post-secondary decisions. For example, when considering gender, men typically have to provide for the home and females must help maintain the home (Nora & Crip, 2009). Parents advise their children based on gender roles and even advise on what careers to pursue. Thus, a family's income can indicate whether a student will be able to afford tuition, determine what institution the student will attend, and if a student will also be living at home and help support the family financially. As students enroll into colleges and universities, their backgrounds and experiences intersect and influence their academic ability to drive and achieve degree completion. The environmental contingencies

examine how students interact with their environments while they are enrolled. Institutional factors are those that are connected with a student's college or university. These can be cost of attendance, enrollment size, location, student demographics, selectivity, attainment, faculty and staff profiles, and success rates. Latinx students cannot determine how an institution manages its own factors; the student must manage to learn and navigate those factors. First-generation students have to invest additional effort negating the institutional factors that challenge them academically and financially; however, many cannot balance personal and institutional challenges which leads to stopping out (Nora & Crip, 2009).

Ayala (2012) reviewed the state of research within Latinx attainment at that time, by highlighting how the United States has created systemic flaws that impact educational mobility not based on the financial background of a student. Ayala recommends scholars examine the intersections of the current state and practices of diversity in higher education while paying attention to the development of students through their enrollment and retention. She states "The United States certainly influences .... but also provides access to resources that may encourage or reinforce high educational attainment aspirations" (p. 1043). Accepting the differences in the Latinx experiences and comparing attainment results to other minority groups allows for research to cross-examine groups and focus on the differences and similarities of attainment and factors that contribute to their success.

McLendon and Perna (2014) state, "variations across states and time are the primary challenges to researchers who are attempting to understand which state policy actions might best improve higher education attainment" (p. 10). Throughout their discussion, they emphasize how research on attainment is difficult to conduct due to policies and political systems. Since each state has its own higher education system, attempting to consolidate a metric for the entire



country is difficult. They recommend research be done with the policies surrounding educational attainment and compare it based on each state and its individual state political system.

Attainment research typically examines a student's family, environment, academic profile, income, and other personal and systematic variables that interact with the student's life.

McLendon and Perna (2014), negate that concept of personal and systemic barriers and focus on policy. They believe state policies play a central role in raising higher education attainment rates and they have access and control of state education budgets. Each state focuses on its population needs and each allocates a budget for student persistence and reducing the attainment gap.

Flynn (2014), reviews the functions of student engagement behaviors through Vincent Tinto's (2010) prior research of educational attainment. He summarized how Tinto's research reviews academic and social engagement matters for post-secondary degree attainment. In Flynn's findings, he agrees how both forms of engagement in first-year college students impact degree attainment. He measured how different forms of engagement between family, individual and institutional interact with a student's ability to complete a degree. The research illustrated how students engaged throughout their academic journey through advising, peer and mentor connections and learning communities, all of which contributed to their overall retention in their respective institutions. He quotes Tinto in his conclusion, "the more students are academically and socially engaged, the more likely they are to persist and graduate" (p. 491). Flynn agrees with Tinto's prior research as it is still prevalent and applicable in present research in educational attainment. The article does provide a holistic review of Tinto's research while complementing it with quantitative data; however, Flynn does not provide a connection to attainment results based on ethnic or minority groups. He focuses on the collective analysis of higher education

throughout the United States by studying the intersection of student engagement behaviors, both academic and social, to examine how they contribute to bachelor degree attainment (p. 490).

### **Background of Identity**

Traditionally, Latinxs have been found to be a close-knit social unit. Family is considered an important value in the culture. A household consists not only of parents and children but also of extended family (Clutter & Nieto, 2001). According to Nora and Crisp (2009), extended family members often assume responsibilities of other family members. Within Latinx households, individuals have a moral responsibility to support each other financially, emotionally, medically and with other arising issues (p. 333). Latinx families instill the importance of honor, good manners, and respect to their children (Clutter & Nieto, 2001). Latinx students who live in the United States learn English and American values from school; however, for parents, preserving the Spanish language, culture, religion, and values is a practice that is sustained at home typically by the female caretaker, mother, and/or grandmother. More than 90% of Latinx populations consider themselves Roman Catholic. Mothers instill religious practices and care for the home and children, while the father is seen as the family leader and provider for the entire family. It is becoming more common for mothers to work part-time jobs in order to subsidize household expenses. Gender norms in the culture are evolving based on U.S. practices that influence households (Clutter & Zubieta, 2009).

In the study *Barriers to School Success for Latino Students* (2016), Marrero reviews the Latinx family culture. He examines the importance of family values within Latinx's lives and traditions. Marrero identifies three common values; Familiso (Family), Respeto (Respect), and Educacion (Education). These values, according to Marrero, impact student achievement by the interaction of activities and relationships fostered within a family:

- *Familismo* - “Is a powerful source of strength and support to their families, Latinxs are strongly connected and have a sense of obligation to one another” (p. 181)
- *Respeto* - “Is a value that parents emphasize, respect for one another, elders, other adults, family relationships, and community” (p. 181)
- *Educacion* - “[Latinx] parents believe it is their responsibility to educate their children for life, not just for school. Within the [Latinx] community there is a collective sense of responsibility among families for one another’s children” (p. 181)

The cultural values families share with their children determine how they will develop relationships with their academic environments (Crisp & Nora, 2015). In connection, students’ social engagement, behavior, and cognitive development in education stems from the cultural influence they have received in their home and community environments. Latinxs prefer to connect with others who share similar values and language. A student’s culture influences how they develop their network and ability to connect with teachers, mentors, employers, and peers (Crisp & Nora, 2015). Cultural representation is valuable in a student’s environment; having individuals whom they can connect with in a university, strengthens a student’s ability to navigate through an institution and persist (Crisp & Nora, 2015). Students are more likely to share private information with people who share common values and similar backgrounds as they do. While students respect professors and university staff, if they have a connection with them, it allows them to share their goals, and the struggles they are experiencing while pursuing a bachelor's degree. Being able to have this connection is vital for Latinxs, as minority students see higher education as a privilege (Washington, 2020). Due to the lack of representation, students develop feelings of anxiety and discouragement towards their journey in higher education. Being able to have university personnel, whom students can trust and relate to,

facilitates their transition and continuity in academic programs. Furthermore, it allows them to develop a sense of belonging in their institution and their academic journey (Witkowski, Obregon, Bruner, & Alanis 2020).

There are many home environment and parental influences shape their cognitive and social development. Language is one factor. According to Gandara (2017), the underperformance of Latinx children has been frequently attributed to the fact that so many grow up in homes and neighborhoods where Spanish is the primary language. Often because of a language barrier, Latinx students also receive little support with class assignments or support with other academic needs. Traditionally Latinxs, speak Spanish at home and are not able to practice English since their parents or not able to teach them or converse with them. Learning a language goes beyond the classroom and needs to be applied in the household to fully integrate the language into daily lives. The differences in language and culture also contribute to misunderstanding of the education system and the meaning of college, as Latinx students are not able to learn or practice English as other peers. Although Latinx parents push their children to pursue higher education, they do not fully understand the systematic approach, emotional stability, time commitment, or academic preparation needed to be successful as college and university students. According to Holcomb-McCoy (2010) low-income students and students of color fare significantly better in gaining admission to 4-year colleges and universities when their parents are involved in their schooling (p. 116). Students who come from families with no background in higher education find the process difficult, since they lack the knowledge to understand the transition. About fifty percent of Latinxs are considered first-generation students who are at risk of not completing post-secondary education due to the lack of family awareness of the college process (p. 3).

According to Liu (2011), students will stop out or will not complete a degree when it is difficult for them to engage and integrate into college life.

There are also a number of institutional factors that contribute to a Latinx student's low academic achievements. According to Zambran and Hurtado (2016), "Mexican American families have the highest poverty rates of any ethnic group, yet they have motivated their children to obtain an education that has opened pathways of social mobility beyond their current economic circumstances" (p. 4). Due to their generational status in the United States, families understand how an education can open doors to better opportunities. First-generation students are less likely to receive training or exposure to the process of enrolling into a university or college (Liu, 2011). Unlike other racial groups, Latinxs have less support and visibility through resources (Nora & Crisp, 2009). This is due to them encountering inequality, poverty, and racial discrimination in educational systems. In spite of these inequalities, parents and caretakers have been able to navigate the United States and see the importance of an education as a steppingstone towards a better life (p. 319). A student's upbringing and cultural background follows them into higher educational and determines their academic readiness, how they interact with others, and how they persist through higher education. The social cultural background of Latinxs is often mis represented in institutions, which can challenge how they engage, connect and even determine if they will complete a bachelor's degree.

## **Barriers**

A postsecondary education provides a higher lifetime income, lower rates of unemployment and government dependency, an increased tax base, and greater civic engagement (Perna, 2014). Providing educational access benefits both the individual and society; however, access to higher education remains a challenge for families of low socioeconomic backgrounds

(Long, 2014). Latinx students face multiple barriers that interconnect and challenge them while pursuing a bachelor's degree. Barriers like lack of financial aid, lack of educational readiness, and family obligations lead to lower attainment success for Latinx students (p.11). These barriers are realities that students face while pursuing a bachelor's degree. First-generation students are not familiar with the college experience nor the requirements of the academic rigor needed.

A majority of Latinx students are expected to care for other family members and provide financially at a young age (Nora & Crip, 2009). Family responsibilities distract from the concentration needed for study and to fully integrate themselves into their institutions (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2013). Due to these obligations and lack of integration, students are influenced to attend colleges and universities close to home, due to financial barriers and family obligations (Nora & Crip, 2009). Attending local institutions allows students to pay lower tuition costs and have flexible schedules to balance a working schedule and personal obligations. However, attending institutions that are close to home, or even living at home, often hinders a student's ability to have the college experience of living in a residence hall, having a roommate(s), being exposed to diverse populations, experiencing new cities and regions, and becoming immersed in new cultures and ideas. Having these experiences allows students to build social capital, develop new perspectives, and explore their identities (Contreras & Contreras 2015). These new experiences can support students develop skills and understanding of people, culture, information, ideas, which they might have not been exposed to in their communities or homes. Higher Education prepares students beyond an academic subject or career, as institutions have students from various walks of lives and are able to interact with each other and become influenced by one another.

The lack of information on admissions, financial/career literacy and degree plans that are available to Latinx students negates a successful transition from high school and into higher education. Many Latinx students do not have the proper availability to information to successfully navigate a 4-year college or university. This informational barrier defies a student's aspirations to have a bachelor's degree, since this access to literacy can provide a first-generation student important information on how to navigate the transition (Nora & Crip, 2009). So many are advised to pursue an associate degree in a community college, which tends to be a more accessible option for students with academic and financial barriers. In fact, two-thirds of Latinx youth are advised to enroll into community colleges due to their academic backgrounds in K-12, financial challenges, family obligations, or career aspirations (Becerra, 2010). Students without access to information feel a disconnect to the transition as they navigate the shift from K-12 and into higher education. The disconnection isolates students from the process because as they progress, they are challenged to learn the information simultaneously, while making mistakes through the process. In contrast, students who have had academic and social experiences that have prepared them to understand their goals and purpose in higher education, are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and complete a baccalaureate program. According to Strayhorn (2008), students who have a sense of belonging feel a connection not only to the transition process but to their institution. In addition, the feeling of belonging allows for students to feel a connection with their academics and take ownership of their academic goals. In Long's (2014), *Supporting Disadvantaged Youth*, feeling a sense of belonging is connected to students having the academic preparation to excel in higher education during K-12. One way that entering Latinx students may not feel a sense of belong to the new institution is their lack of academic preparedness. Long (2014) discusses how over 40 percent of minority populations take a form of

remedial course before enrolling in college-level courses; this is due to students' lack of preparation in particular in core subjects like English, Writing, and Mathematics. Long recommends that students be academically prepared while in high school and receive intervention in subjects where they have low-performance measures. Colleges and universities then may be able to improve their framework for their remedial courses that can facilitate a student's transition into the institutional academic requirements. She states:

Improving placement policies by incorporating high school course-taking and performance information would reduce the chance that students are assigned to remediation incorrectly and would help schools to better target services. In addition, redesigning remediation programs with innovative pedagogies and support services in order to streamline the pathway through remediation and enhance student progress would reduce the time needed to complete the courses and improve rates of success. Finally, we could reduce the need for remediation by better aligning curricula and having high school students take college readiness assessments earlier so that they can make better decisions about the courses they take before entering college (p. 10).

Academic barriers can develop early in K-12 education; however, the high school curriculum is the last opportunity for students to develop the academic proficiency that a bachelor's degree requires. Long (2014) believes that students who take college readiness assessments are able to self-assess their own needs and read degree programs properly and enroll into courses that fit their academic level. Students who receive remediation while in high school are able to foster growth areas that could otherwise be a challenge as college students. In addition, Long makes the connection on academic pipelines in higher education and negates the model. Her stance is for institutions to improve their practice on remedial programs by properly



assessing students' academic level as they transition from high school and into a university/college. Oftentimes, students take remedial courses and fail them; at-risk students cannot afford to take courses that do not count for degree requirements due to time restraints and commitments and financial factors, such as lack of loans, family contributions, and scholarships (Heisdorf, 2019). In order to address these academic issues, post-secondary institutions have created summer bridge programs that support the transition into college so that students can develop those academic skills and build readiness for college level courses. These programs provide college readiness instruction through writing, reading, and mathematic courses, and supportive services to students which includes ongoing academic counseling and advising (Excelencia in Education, 2020).

### **Educational Readiness**

Social and cultural influences play a role in educational readiness and bachelor's degree attainment and social mobility (Haveman & Smeeding, 2016). Each student's educational background, pathway, experience, and ability to adapt in academic settings vary depending on their background. Students interact with and learn from peers, educators, and community and family members from various backgrounds. Politics, culture, and values are part of their learning schema that come from lived experiences. These backgrounds influence students' cognitive and social development that ultimately affect college readiness. Since these backgrounds are not tangible, Latinx students and parents are less likely to see them as causes and variables that are influential to success (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). There are common educational factors or reasons that affect students' college readiness. According to Nora and Crisp (2009), there are several points to analyze in students' academic development. They range from college

preparation, performance, and literacy; these variables are critically linked to college retention and attainment.

Educational readiness is a measure that identifies how a student will succeed in higher education through academic preparation and exposure to higher educational literacy before beginning a bachelor's degree. Latinx youth have aspirations to pursue careers that require degrees yet lack the readiness to be able to attain degrees due to the lack of support during K-12 education. The support can be academic, counseling, mentoring and college advising. Latinx students, according to Leyva (2018), are often advised to continue their education but have limited support in their transition as well as how to successfully navigate college long-term to degree completion. Latinx students may also lack role models who have similar backgrounds and cultural values as they do. Schools across the United States have few teachers of color who can relate to students in Spanish or understand the cultural backgrounds of diverse, minority populations (Garcia, 2017). First-generation Latinx students tend to be or have been English Language Learners (ELL) and have to navigate the first years of K-12 learning the language and understanding a system that many of their parents do not understand. Additionally, many first-generation Latinxs students only speak and practice English in their school since they speak Spanish in their households. Students will often have to teach themselves how to navigate the system when they support and translate for their parents. Latinx students also tend to be from at-risk, low funded schools who have limited resources for students and have few programs that supplement the support needed for first-generation students. Having teachers and educators who can recognize the struggle their students have both in and outside the classroom is crucial. These educators can advocate for students and also recognize the needed instruction and agency needed for their lifelong academic success (Leyva, 2018).

It is important to recognize how success for minority populations within higher education stems from K-12 integration. The Latinx school age population has tripled since the 1980's and by 2023, Latinx students are expected to account for one-third of school-age student enrollment (Sanchez, 2016). Although the group is graduating at higher rates than before, on average, over 80 percent of students graduate from high school, and of those 80 percent, only 17 percent will graduate with a four-year degree (Gandara, 2017). One of the challenges that prevents higher education attainment is a student's academic readiness and preparation pathway developed during their high school years. According to Cabrera (2003), students who receive support from their parents are more likely to advance in their educational ambitions. Those students become more qualified in the admission process, are more likely to enroll, receive acceptance, adjust in the transition into their institution and successfully complete a degree (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2004). A student's academic pathway involves three main influences: higher education literacy, parental involvement, and K-12 academic readiness. When students are prepared with the skills, and education to navigate higher education, they are more likely to successfully transition into college or university programs upon high school graduation and complete a bachelor's degree (Heisdorf, 2019). Educational readiness is essential for student academic achievement after high school. A student's academic foundation prepares them to persist and overcome the challenges that might arise during the time of their academic programs. Having the academic maturity to pull from the foundation they acquired in high school will allow them to manage the educational demands and have the awareness to use their skills to navigate resources that support them in their institutions (pg. 5). This maturity also allows students to identify their needs, whether they are academic, financial, mental health, or engagement services, and develop the support system to address said needs (Implementing a Holistic Student Supports Approach,

2018). Williams (2019) believes students who have the privilege to enroll into bachelor's degree programs with parental support, value their education differently than first-generation students, and become more persistent. Persistence means being firm or having continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty and oppression. For continuing-generation students, education is a rite of passage. Whereas for Latinx, it is a privilege to obtain a degree due to all the challenges they face to receive one. However, for those students who have complex problems, persistence is the measurement of their success in higher education; Williams (2019) states "one can't help but observe how much more well equipped some students are to face and overcome obstacles that may stand in the way of them obtaining the expected college diploma than others" (p. 1).

### **Financial**

The expense of higher education tuition prices and overall costs have escalated significantly over the last two decades. Across the country, public, state, and private institutions have inflated the cost of attendance by over 54%. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the average cost was \$16,294 and increased up to \$41,426 within two decades (Boyington & Kerr, 2019). With fees reaching at higher rates, students and family members often choose to either collect high amounts of debt or not pursue higher education at all. At-risk student populations who lack the resources and financial literacy to fund their education are those who incur higher debts. However, students who receive support from family members or have the capital and networks to fund their education can complete degrees at higher rates (Nora & Crisp, 2009). Having the financial means to afford an education and pay tuition are determining factors in a student's ability to persist until degree completion (p. 256).

While there are students who have the financial means to afford a bachelor's degree and those that succeed at higher rates, there are many minority students who have financial

disparities that stem from childhood and into adulthood. Minority students who are highly impacted by their low socio-economic backgrounds and family capital are forced to endure financial setbacks in addition to their educational responsibilities. Students who have to worry about these financial setbacks, tend to stop-out in order to survive. For example, a student who is responsible for paying rent, bills, food, and transportation without support may have difficulty in being able to prioritize their educational aspirations (Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). According to the Pew Research Center (2011), two-thirds of Latinx children live or have experienced poverty and they reside in underrepresented communities with limited educational resources. For example, students who live in impoverished areas lack proper academic resources (e.g., college readiness test prep material, exposure to universities and colleges, application fees, etc.) due to limited tax collections, limiting students to equal education preparation compared to other students who live in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods (Nora & Crisp, 2009).

The differences in resources available to Latinx students separate them from other ethnic groups/populations. Educational success is associated with family wealth, community resources, financial literacy, financial aid, economic equity and equality. Having access to resources prepares students for the academic rigor and ability to navigate higher education (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Latinx students who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds often have lower educational aspirations—a built-in barrier to persist (p. 27). Lower educational aspiration according to Zarate and Burciaga can include only having a high school diploma, enrolling in technical program, enrolling into community colleges, as bachelor degrees or even enrolling into universities or colleges are only for selected students who are academically or financially ready. In addition, students with low-socioeconomic statuses tend to need greater support in their academic environments (p. 28). Latinx students, lack educational resources and informational

wealth within their homes and families and have little exposure to resources that prepare and educate students to successfully transition into higher education.

Latinx families have the highest poverty rates than any other minority group in the country (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2016). To understand the reasons, it is important to define the following terms. One, social mobility can be described as the social position, status, and economic conditions that change over time for an individual or group (Nazimuddin, 2015). Secondly, cultural capital is defined as, the knowledge, skills, educational, and personal advantages that enhance the ability to thrive socially and economically. Even though Latinx students face financial obstacles, they also face structural inequality and lack exposure to those college prep resources that are vital to attainment and readiness (Nora & Crisp, 2009). Students who live in communities that have little to no resources to prepare students to break a generational cycle of poverty. As communities and families mold themselves after past generations, first-generation students must find informational wealth and materials to prepare them for the academic and financial demands of higher education. Nora and Crisp (2009) define persistence as an emotional ability that is developed through an academic environment by experience and habits that drives students to continue on college. Students must be persistent to endure the financial barriers they face (p. 326).

In *The Epistemic Good of Higher Education*, Ben Kotzee (2018) considers Fullinwider and Lichtenberg's (2018) perspectives and believes universities serve the common good. Kotzee goes into detail about social class and socioeconomic status interconnect within a student ability to pursue an education. The journal states universities should view themselves as agents that drive for upward socioeconomic mobility, since institutions contribute to society by equalizing economic opportunities, correcting past injustices, spreading society's financial burdens fairly,

and fostering good citizenship. Additionally, Kotzee (2018) believes that universities unlock access to jobs and social positions for those less privileged in society. Those who have the lowest social class are those that gain the most through university education. On the contrary, Fullinwider and Lichtenberg (2018) believe higher education is currently accessible to all; yet, they believe access should be more restrictive based on a student's academic abilities. According to the authors, all students have the option and ability to pursue degrees and attend institutions that are best suited for their needs since many schools might be open access. However, they believe institutions should be realistic in their admissions process based on a student's academic background and ability to be able to complete a degree, and not only enroll them in hopes for them to be success. Latinx first-generation students have the lowest attainment rates due to their social statuses, but they are able to climb the social ladder through an education, moving them from the lowest status to the highest. Yet, the disparities and realities students face financially ultimately determine their end result. Kotzee (2018) states that education has an instrumental or intrinsic value and he argues that attainment is not direct but rather gained through knowledge.

### **Paying for Higher Education**

One of the most important policy issues is the affordability of higher education. Latinxs struggle to afford and pay for post-secondary education (Nora and Crisp, 2009). Tuition costs are increasing at similar rates as the educational gap for Latinxs broadens. Due to wealth and socio-economic backgrounds, students are being priced out of institutions or are having to borrow large amounts of loans and work to pay for tuition while completing their degree programs. While the cost of completing a bachelor degree is a high financial investment, affordability is a determining factor for a student to continue and complete their education. This section will identify and

review the research to understand how Latinx students afford their education and methods that can be used to aid students financially.

Rendon, Dowd & Nora (2012), review the inequalities between affluent and impoverished students. Privileged students attend elite, selective institutions with large endowments where their families have social and academic capital that supports them to attain a bachelor's degree within four years, while Latinxs who are low-income and first-generation tend to enroll into low-funded public state institutions. Students who have limited financial literacy and have little social and academic capital lack the understanding to navigate their institutions; whereas affluent students have the literacy and support from others to guide them throughout the process. Financial literacy, according to The Financial Literacy and Education Commission, (2012), can be classified as four observations, understanding of finances, parental influences, knowledge, and practice with money, and experience. Latinx students tend to have limited experience with financial information, such as how to use banks, understand loans and interest rates, how to spend and invest money, how to earn a livable income, and how to save. As young adults, Latinxs learn financial habits through experience and practice; however, they make mistakes since they learn through the experience of using money. The commission recognizes that students lack this information and recommends for policy to be implemented to teach students this literacy in public education. The authors express how Latinxs graduate with higher amounts of debt compared to other ethnic groups and account for less than 40 percent of students who pay through loans. Rendon, Dowd, and Nora (2012) review how Latinx students qualify for more federal and state monies; however, due to the lack of financial literacy and immigration status of both students and parents, they tend to not complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid application (FAFSA). Completing the FAFSA allows for institutions to determine the eligibility



of other aids like grants, loans, scholarships, and work-study. Completing the application by its deadline of January 1st is recommended (FAFSA Website, n.d.). However, due to informational barriers, first-generation students tend to not understand the importance of completing the FAFSA as they believe the application only provides national and state money, not the overall award packages they might receive from institutions.

Rendon, Dowd and Nora (2012) recommend the development of Financial Literacy Centers. These centers would be available based on the need of first-generation Latinx youth living in at-risk communities. According to the authors, they should be staffed by bilingual certified financial literacy professionals who are equipped with the knowledge of college entrance exams, applications, scholarships, and degree plans. The agents would guide students and their families with the information and resources to finance their college education through the holistic college preparation curriculum they have been trained in. The centers would support individuals as they apply to institutions and scholarships of their choice, learn about the financial process, and be exposed to SAT and ACT prep material. A similar program funded the U.S. Department of Education through its Federal TRIO Programs. The Educational Opportunity Centers Program ([EOCP](#)) was established in 1967 through the Higher Education Act of 1965. The purpose of the program is to provide counseling and information on college admissions to qualified adults who are pursuing post-secondary education. They provide academic advice, personal counseling, and career workshops, information on postsecondary education opportunities and student financial assistance, help in completing applications for college admissions, testing, and financial aid, and mentorship of at-risk populations. These resources have proved how the EOCP can be used as a role model for future literacy centers.

## **Family Wealth**

Family wealth indicates a student and their family's economic background and possibly to afford a bachelor's degree. This section will review how financial stability can help sustain a student in their higher education funding. According to the report *Latino Students Share Their College Experience* (2020), policymakers need to seek systemic change in higher education by acknowledging how family wealth is linked to the affordability of education. Based on the report, students are supported by state public education systems; which help narrow the racial wealth gap over generations. Income is a measurement to identify a family's household economic well-being and prosperity. Thus, income is used to calculate poverty indicators and eligibility for social programs and financial aid (Jeffrey & Suarez, 2015). Being able to understand how families who have financial stability and are able to support their students financially through college is a privilege. Those who do not understand must have financial stability or have access to other funding resources. Policymakers, according to Jeffrey and Suarez (2015), believe that developing an understanding for economic privilege can support students by advocating for financial support for underrepresented students with financial need. While also using research to fund and support their defense in supporting first-generation Latinx students through the development of legislation and political advocacy to not only address attainment but also create a change in the country.

In her research Jin Jez (2008) acknowledges how there is limited research on family wealth. She states, “The literature surrounding wealth and the college-going process is sparse, due likely to the lack of data available on wealth” (p. 4). In the research she reviews how the connection of parental wealth is connected to post-secondary access and educational attainment. Through the reflection of family wealth students are able to attend college and are more likely to

be encouraged and have the resources to continue education beyond high school. A student's economic background according to Jin Jez directly affects how they develop a formal education that prepares them for college. Thus, a student will either understand the costs against the cost benefits of attending a college or university. In The Urban Institute Report *Wealth Inequality Is a Barrier to Education and Social Mobility* (2017), reviewed how children from low-wealth families are less likely to go to college and have implications for long-run wealth inequality. Wealth inequality, which has grown in recent decades due to wage gaps between groups and classes demonstrates how different racial and ethnic groups are underrepresented in higher education. A college education provides students the access to build family wealth and ascend in their own upward economic mobility, and collectively can reduce the gap between wages and earning potential. The source states the country will have to create support pillars by having policymakers consider investing in the development of family wealth for minority populations not by providing income, but by developing policies and programs aimed at the economic advancement of low- and moderate-income families.

One in three Latinx children live in low-resourced communities. According to the *State of Hispanic Wealth Report* (2019), bachelors attainment moves households with the lowest incomes from \$17,400 to \$91,800. Family wealth is connected with a household's combined income. They reported that in 2016 the average Latinx asset value was \$27,666 as opposed to \$235,515 for non- Hispanic households. Those with some college have five times the median household wealth than those with no college. With the continued population growth of Latinxs, the report compares the potential wealth and earning of the population. In summary, in order for the population to progress and build wealth they will need a degree to market them in the workforce and allow them to own assets. The average age of Latinxs in the U.S. is 29, the slight increase of

Latinx homeownership comes from individuals with degrees. The report indicated how degrees allow individuals to build financial stability and build wealth and have less debt.

The demand for post-secondary education in the 21st century is a call for economic security and prosperity. However, due to low educational attainment, the Latinx population in the United States has the lowest earning potential than other groups in the country. Marrero (2016) reviewed how socio-cultural and socio-economic factors can impact educational attainment among Latinx students. Thus, it illustrated the importance of recognizing a student's background by educators, communities, families, and policymakers. By doing so, they have an awareness for the population and can develop possible achievement metrics and goals for bachelor attainment. The Latinx population growth is expected to continue to broaden in the coming decades. Student attainment and achievement will affect the country's economic progress, with the population growing the economic health of the country and relying on Hispanic and Latinx populations. Prior generations were able to compete for similar earning equity without a post-secondary degree. Currently, 65 percent of jobs require more than a high school degree. Hence, with over 80 percent of Latinx students graduating with a high school degree, they account for only 20 percent of the student enrollment in higher education throughout the country (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017). These trends illustrate the imperative need for government support for educational achievement for the population.

According to Liu (2011) since the Latinx population is young compared to others in the country, the population will account for 30 percent of the population by 2050. With this in mind, the country's economy will be dependent on Latinxs in the workforce. As the economy shifts, high-paying careers will require a college degree to have the skills needed to perform job duties. However, currently, Latinxs have low completion rates, and are not prepared for the demands

and requirements of the workforce. In order for the U.S. economy to project a healthy balance, student success within higher education is vital. Students who receive educational and career readiness achieve at higher rates (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Social mobility is promoted through readiness, this allows students from the lowest level class to achieve a stable economic profile. Citizens with higher educational success are healthier, are active community members, contribute to the tax pools, and are active in elections. These students who are prepared academically will be able to provide representation and support their industries. It is difficult for students to break the cycle of poverty since their families have been embedded in low-income communities for generations (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, pg. 61). Liu states (2011),

Latino students face unique obstacles in accessing and completing their education, they require specific, intentional support to reach their academic goals. For example, many are first generation college-goers—almost 50 percent of Latino undergraduates' parents have never enrolled in or completed college. Without family background in the college experience, these students may find it difficult to fully engage in college life, which can lead them to drop out and not complete a degree. (p. 3)

There is a clear gap between student enrollment, degree attainment and completion since half of Latinxs do not have a parent who has a bachelors diploma compared to other students. Targeting objectives to support students are vital for the country's future economy. Lui's (2011) states that providing access to higher education is not enough. Students need support to remain in their institutions and earn a degree. As the gap for high school completion narrows for Latinx populations, political and education leaders and educators need to understand how to address the rapidly growing gap of attainment between groups within higher education. Latinxs are seeking education as a means for a more prosperous future (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Although high

school graduation rates are high and the access into higher education is increasing, completion rates are a relevant challenge for students. Sixty-five percent of minority students enroll into overcrowded and underfunded open access campuses. Underfunded campuses often lack the resources Latinx students need to complete their degree; for example, resource centers, language support, financial literacy and aid, mentorship, faculty and staff representation, and many others.

### **Social Capital**

Research in higher education attainment indicates social capital as a driving factor for student success. Social capital refers to the resources people inherit or build in their lives that form as supportive ties or relationships (Garcia, 2014). These resources can be information channels, social norms, networks, values, and relationships that mobilize a student's access, abilities, and success in attaining post-secondary education. The role of social capital in higher education exists within families and schools as they both have positive effects on student success (Crawley, Cheuk, Mansoor, Perez, & Park, 2019). Garcia (2014) defines social capital as an asset, embedded within social relations, which can influence one's life outcomes through channels available in relationships. These relationships with others in one's networks impose norms and expectations and serve as conduits of needed information and resources. Gonzalez (2013) reviews how Latinxs come from families with limited experiences with higher education. These students lack access to academic resources compared to other students. Latinxs benefit from relationships with institutional agents such as staff, faculty, peers, and mentors that bridge them towards academic success.

Social capital for Latinxs represents academic outcomes, perspective towards education, achievement, and attainment (Garcia, 2014). A family's connections, networks, and ability to understand the educational system allows for them to have an awareness for their students' needs

while advocating for them and encouraging them to participate in efforts that prepare them for higher education (Shoji, Haskins, Rangel, & Sorensen, 2012). However, for first-generation students, their parents miss having social capital to support students academically. As stated in the Background of Identity section of the research, parents see the value of education and encourage their students to pursue a college degree, yet Latinx parents do not have the connections nor understand the contexts of higher education to support their children. In her research, Portillo de Yúdice (2015), focuses her reviews on breaking down social concepts and historical timelines which illustrate educational inequality among Latinx populations. The research reviews how segregation, academic barriers, and social perspectives have affected Latinx success in education. The paper does negate the concept of Latinx parents not seeing the value of education, and the author does detail how parents value education as they understand that financial stability stems from academic success. Portillo de Yudice (2015) suggest attainment is a national problem and compares the rates to those of other countries, and states, “Increasing the human capital of Latino students through higher education attainment is imperative to increase their quality of life and the standard of living of the entire country since the Latino population will be one-third of the United States population by 2060” (p. 57). Social capital is vital to motivate students through higher education, developing a network for at-risk students and parents provides them with resources to not only value the importance of education but have expectations on the reality of pursuing a bachelor's degree (Shoji, Haskins, Rangel, & Sorensen, 2012).

Gonzalez (2013) also examines the role of social capital in Latinx academic success; he focuses his research on student success stories based on experiences students have had in their academic journey. Rather than focusing on attainment factors such as financial, systematic,

educational, and family, which many researchers have focused their work on, Gonzalez reviews how success begins in early education through preparation programs that assess students and focus on their development, which would ultimately prepare them for higher education. He agrees that mentorship is vital for students. Students who engage in mentorship opportunities in and outside the classroom have higher attainment rates compared to other peers who lack mentorship opportunities (p. 10). He connects mentorship and success to social capital. Latinxs struggle to build social networks but through on-campus engagement opportunities they can connect with others and build support systems within their institutions. Garcia (2014) reviews how parental encouragement stems from their academic background. Cultural capital influences, for example, college choice through the provision of knowledge and information about college that is presented in a household. For Latinx parents, they morally support their students but cannot offer academic support since they do not have an understanding or background in higher education.

### **Latinxs in Higher Education - The Importance of Belonging**

As the largest minority group, Latinx undergraduate students complete and obtain degrees at a lower rate compared to other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Garcia (2017) suggested that retention should not be viewed as student failure by researchers, policy makers, and educators. Rather, it should focus on the barrier's students need to overcome in order to succeed in their degree attainment. She emphasized how research should be conducted through a lens of student self-belonging. This would examine students' experiences and their moral and emotional connection to their institutions and groups. According to Lemley (2014), "sense of belonging refers to a students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued



by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 55). Lemly goes on to review how a students’ sense of belonging is significant for not only social development but also for retention and academic achievement since the feeling of belonging is an emotion that triggers motivation and influences behavior.

Nora and Crisp (2009) suggest engagement allows students to feel interconnected with their institutions. They reviewed how individual variables in mentorship, and social support from friends and their environments provided comfort for students. They also reviewed how environments provide nourishment by encouraging tolerance, acceptance, and engagement of students and faculty in social contexts. In the article, *The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education* (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, and Swanson, 2012), engagement is defined as an umbrella of good practices in teaching, research, and service. According to the authors, a highly engaged institution has five dimensions: Philosophy and mission of community engagement, faculty support, student leadership, community partnership, and institutional support and infrastructure (p. 17). Philosophy and mission connect to an institution's core value in supporting students. This can range from target student populations, goals for student success, resources for at-risk populations, and future goals of targeting attainment and student support program. The faculty and involvement dimension focuses on how professors mentor their students beyond the classroom setting. This can be moral, academic, career, financial advising, and even in their ability to foster a sense of belonging to the institution by connecting them with campus resources and enrichment activities like internships, research, jobs, scholarships, and grants. Student leadership and support programs aim to connect the student with interests that help them develop skills that typically cannot only be learned in the classroom but through practice. For example, volunteering, student organization memberships, on-campus employment, and service-learning.

Community partnerships can be alumni relations, companies, organizations, agencies either government or political. Lastly, institutional support and infrastructure represents policymaking, funding, administrative/departmental support, evaluation and assessment, and long-term vision for student attainment and retention. These five dimensions allow students to develop that sense of belonging Garcia (2017) advocated for. Students who can find an area to focus on (whether it's leadership, research, mentorship, etc.) allows them to feel connected to their institution. This allows them to network, make connections, and foster relationships which they can resort to for support during their educational experience in college.

### **Framing Latinx Student Success in Higher Education**

Access to post-secondary education provides personal and broader social benefits that lead to completing a degree. In comparison with high school graduates, those who complete a bachelor's degree earn \$25,000 more annually, with graduation rates steadily increasing among the Latinx groups. About 50 percent of students enroll into a four-year institution and graduate in six years after graduating from high school (Nichols, 2017). While success among the group is increasing, the gap Latinx students face is a result of challenges like systemic disadvantages, being English learners, being low-income, and being from low resourced high schools that have less experienced teachers and have high numbers of low-income students (p. 1). Even with these odds, Latinx students can have success in higher education.

According to the Higher Learning Commission (2018), student success is measured through institutional change and is understood by a pipeline that enrolls students and supports them as they navigate through college until degree completion. The Higher Learning Commission (2018) reviews how institutions traditionally have a single sided framework that do not adequately represent the Latinx student experience and does not represent the challenges

first-generation students face. These experiences can range from academic experiences, familial/personal/work commitments, identity, and others. However, they recommend a multi-connected alternative framework that would allow institutions to understand the importance of a holistic achievement. This multi-connected alternative framework records not only the academic variables in a student's time in higher education, but also factors that interconnect with their attainment success. The framework would assess external variables like family, finances, health, academic background, culture, and commitments, as all these are part of students' life and can dictate how they navigate through a bachelor's degree. These variables can prevent a student from being able to continue or even succeed academically in their institution. Student success, according to the report, should examine the interactions in students' ability to learn, thrive, and complete their degree. Although success stems from degree completion, understanding today's population beyond a single-sided student framework provides an understanding of outside variables and influences. Today's students are also caregivers, employees, community members, and are connected to multiple identities and responsibilities. Having a framework that positions administrators and educators to understand a student identity and background may help to successfully measure student success holistically through students' educational experiences. These experiences can be associated with the proficiencies needed for success beyond the institution, for life and employment. An ideal framework according to the *The Higher Learning Commission* (2018) consists of the following:

1. Clear understanding of the student population served along with their needs,
2. Regular and ongoing involvement of students in the process of designing supports and making sense of data,

3. Clarity of process on the part of institutions to select and implement approaches that align with students that build upon and inform research, and
4. Examination of what works and for whom and under what circumstances to achieve success.

According to the *Higher Learning Commission* (2018), a flexible system allows data to be adaptable and focused on individuals' student circumstances. Through the multi-layered framework, student success becomes more than a single metric pipeline and a method of intervention, but instead the framework allows for solutions and direction to enhance student engagement through a systematic perspective. The commission ends by reviewing the current discussions in student success which are measured by constructs that do not fully represent students, such as academic factors. They also look at the holistic student background and experience. Students today need to be understood beyond their academic needs. Their needs include flexible timing, childcare, food insecurities, and access to technology. In addition, the report acknowledges that student success is enhanced by how well an institution addresses and meets the needs of its students and recommends that institutions prioritize providing resources for their minority demographics. By addressing students' needs, institutions would be held accountable for their ability to not only better understand students but provide resources for that would allow them to perform at the same rates as higher achieving student populations. Additionally, addressing student needs, allows campuses to understand their student bodies; measure their student holistic needs accordingly, and align their processes, practices, and organizational culture according to the student population the institution serves. Lastly, the report recommends that institutions have resources funded strategically through the outcomes based on results from student success measurements. According to the *Higher Learning Commission*

(2018), student success in higher education stems from institutional influences. For a majority of first-generation college students, the lack of information on admissions, financial literacy, degree programs and career options are a disservice. The lack of information provided or presented by institutions to their students regarding available resources and support programs hinders their ability to continue their education and causes them to feel discouraged by the institutional process (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Tinto (2016) suggests that colleges and universities to be consistent with their goals and expectations for students. For example, expectations fall under three broad areas: institutional success, success in a program of study, and success within a course. These three forms of expectations become an institutional conversation on retention. Institutions who understand this conversation are those who outline expectations in orientation activities, program advising, coursework, and are supported by faculty and staff who drive conversations related to institutional resources available to students.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Conclusion**

A college degree provides a student the foundation for financial stability and social mobility. Undereducated communities and groups, such as Latinxs, experience marginalization find struggles to acquire the skills needed to compete in a fast-changing job market and economy. As the Latinx population continues to increase, addressing the implication of economic and social stability will depend on the overall Latinx academic success in higher education. Increasing Latinx academic success will narrow the achievement gap and contribute to graduation success and rates that will ultimately stimulate a positive impact on the country's economic and social participation.

In this section, the conclusions will be derived from the themes found in the reviewed literature of first-generation Latinx bachelor attainment. The conclusions were based on the purpose of the review and the question that drove the study. The implications of the literature review and the resultant recommendations will also be explained. Recommendations will be based on the literature and the implications that arose from the source.

### **Limitations**

The paper did face several barriers during the collection of the sources. Much of the research that is available and that has been conducted in the area of attainment and retention targets micro research areas within Latinx populations; for example, specific college attainment in gender, age & even state attainment, and attainment in certain programs or industries. These areas focused on understanding retention and attainment metrics based on region of the country, language, academic backgrounds, gender, and specific degree plans. In addition, during the collection of sources, a majority of the research that is available has been published more than

five years ago. Very few research publications are from the last decade, many are from the early 2000s, and focus on the outcomes of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

This systematic review of the literature examined the attainment factors among Latinxs. Many authors agree with the need for economic support for Latinx students. In addition, several sources connected low attainment rates to a student's academic background. Authors examined these academic backgrounds by focusing their research on K-12 preparation, exposure to college readiness material, financial and career literacy, and family academic history and attainment.

Latinx academic attainment is a critical topic of discussion in higher education. As an educator and first-generation college student, I understand how life's circumstances can predetermine your academic trajectory and define your climb on the social mobility ladder. Personally, I understand how education attainment is a key to open doors not only to financial freedom but to lifelong success not only for the individual but for the entire family and future generations.

## **Discussion**

Among the literature highlighted in this systematic review, the following are a few recommendations made by different studies: a call for a country financial support policy for at-risk students (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2016), providing college readiness materials to students (Nora & Crips, 2009), a movement toward open access enrollment for first-generation students (Gandara & Contreras, 2009), and a need for institutional accountability on retention and attainment (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2016).

The literature review demonstrated how different factors challenge Latinx students' educational attainment. The analysis of attainment has illustrated the future commitment that needs to be made in order to support Latinx students. My recommendations for the issue are to

first develop a system that examines Latinx student experiences, not only in higher education but also in K-12. Secondly, it is important to understand through assessment and research how to encourage and sustain student success in higher education by understanding the cultural, racial, financial, and academic backgrounds of first-generation Latinx students. Third, recognize the importance of attainment, and hold institutions accountable to improving low attainment rates among Latinx first-generation students. Lastly, as a society, we must recognize that Latinxs face challenges in the country and in our educational systems.

These recommendations support the common themes of the literature review. Attainment should continue to be researched through a lens that understands the intersectionality Latinxs embody and the factors that relate to their success. As Ayala (2012) suggests, for a long-time, poverty has been the factor identified in the literature that prevents Latinxs from attaining high levels of education. However, a student's ability to obtain a bachelor's degree goes beyond socioeconomic status. A student's ability to complete a degree is interconnected with several variables and, ultimately, by the influences of support within the higher education system and the country.

### **Implications for Research**

The literature review indicated that Latinx students do face several factors that challenge their ability to receive a bachelor's diploma. While there are many sources and published studies on the area of Latinx bachelor's degree attainment, there are areas that future research can target for a more holistic approach to the study of Latinx students in higher education.

Future research should be conducted through a heterogeneity lens of the Latinx population. While this review stated that it will account for all Latino/a, Hispanic, or other forms of labeling, and gender representation collectivity as Latinx, the research that was reviewed



revealed that Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana students were at the center of most studies. The collected research had an underrepresentation of other ethnic identities. The review revealed that few studies targeted other Latin American populations, nationalities, or even U.S. territories.

The use of language to identify Latinx students is also critical for researchers to acknowledge. Each study that was reviewed had an individual approach in identifying the population. In this review, I used Latinx to be inclusive of pan-ethnic identities within Latinx; however, the reviewed studies use terms like Latino, Latina, Latin@, Latinx, Latin\*, Hispanic, Mexican American. Such variations in the use of language indicate that identity is fluid, political, and geographically specific. Therefore, using one term over another in research about Latinx students' needs to be further investigated in relation to the populations of each study.

In addition, the review did cover how Latinx students do have backgrounds that intersect (e.g., academic, familial, cultural, and financial) and shape their journey in higher education. Future research should explore the forms of capital that Latinx students bring into institutions, and how this capital is viewed and treated on campus. While not all Latinx students are academically prepared, research should acknowledge how their identities, backgrounds, cultural capital, perspectives, persistence, family obligations, and maturity can be an asset for institutions to tap into them as support structures for attainment measures. Thus, future research should avoid using a deficit approach to measuring student success. This indicates the weakness the students have rather than the assets students bring with them into an institution. This approach would celebrate and acknowledge students for their strengths rather than target factors that hinder attainment.

## **Implications for Practice**

The literature review illustrated how recent research targets attainment through deficit factors of attainment based on cultural background, academic readiness, social capital, and familial understanding of higher education. This approach has focused on the student rather than the systematic approach of support that is given to Latinx students. This section outlines implications for practice in the area of first-generation Latinx students' bachelor's degree attainment.

The method of researching Latinx student bachelor's degree attainment should stop operating from the deficit perspective. The approach should view students from an asset-based approach and conduct studies based on assets that Latinx students have or develop before enrolling in higher education. Current research has viewed students as lacking forms of capital needed for them to be successful; for example, lack of knowledge, first-generation, poor, lack of family support, and others. Yet, despite these backgrounds and characteristics, many are successful. Such a reality recognizes that in addition to challenges, these students also have strengths, resources, and assets otherwise not considered by institutions of higher education. Thus, research should focus on asset-based approaches and find ways for institutions to apply these assets in their approach toward student support.

Educational leaders should identify accountability measures for institutions that are responsive to the population of students they admit and enroll. Institutions should hold themselves accountable for equity and their pledge to support minority students in higher education, especially those with minority-serving designations. Institutions know the students they enroll. They know they are underprepared, have financial setbacks, come from low-funded and impoverished communities, and choose to still admit the students. The responsibility is often

placed on students for their individual success; yet, institutions also bear responsibility for the students the recruit, admit, and enroll. Institutions should provide additional resources to supplement and strengthen students' ability to succeed.

While there is a vast amount of research that targets first-generation Latinx student success, this conversation has been going on for decades. Yet, the conversation is still relevant today. The U.S. educational system, and those involved need to move the conversation and action to address Latinx student attainment forward. As the literature reviewed demonstrated, the present and future workforce of the country will depend on Latinxs having bachelor's degrees to mobilize the workforce. The practice of attainment needs to transition from research, into practice, and into results that are tangible and that prove that Latinxs as a whole are receiving bachelor's diplomas in today's economy and sociopolitical contexts.

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## **Vita**

Heriberto Garcia was born in Los Angeles, California on September 21, 1994. After completing his work in high school at Bowie High School, El Paso, Texas in 2013, he enrolled in The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and received a Bachelor of Arts in 2017. Garcia began working UTEP as a staff member soon after. He enrolled into the UTEP department of teacher education to pursue a graduate degree in January 2018.