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Navigating Postsecondary Pathways: The College Choice Experiences of First-Generation Latina/o Transfer Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the college choice and transfer decision-making processes of six high-achieving first-generation Latina/o transfer students who began their postsecondary studies at a community college and later transferred to a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution. Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis, four themes emerged from data analysis to explain the factors that influenced participants' decisions to enroll in community college: (a) Inadequate Guidance from School Personnel, (b) Financial Concerns, (c) Familial Factors, and (d) Community College as an Appropriate Match. Additionally, two themes related to the decision to transfer to a four-year institution emerged: (a) Access to Greater Opportunities, and (b) Support and Motivation. The findings of this study will aid researchers and educators alike in understanding and supporting the college choice decisions of high-achieving first-generation Latina/o students.

Introduction

Latinas/os represent 17.6% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). It is projected that by 2060, the Latina/o population will increase from 54 million to over 119 million to comprise approximately 28% of the total U.S. population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). While population growth continues, there is a need for attention to the educational needs of Latina/o students. The shrinking number of students pursuing and completing a higher education is evidence of the challenges many Latinas/os encounter throughout the educational pipeline. Latinas/os represent 25% of the U.S. school age (Kindergarten—12th grade) population and only 78% graduated high school in the 2014–2015 school year (McFarland et al., 2017). Further, 67% of Latina/o students immediately enroll in college (McFarland et al., 2017), but only 45.8% earn a college degree within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017).

The combination of significant Latina/o population growth and low secondary and postsecondary degree attainment rates has major implications for the national economy and underscores the urgency of making their educational needs a priority (Gándara, 2015; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017). Extant research serves as a starting point for further investigation into the college-going experiences of first-generation Latina/o college students. Drawing from a larger study, the purpose of this investigation was to examine the college choice and community college transfer decision-making processes of high-achieving first-generation Latina/o transfer students. The researcher explored the research questions: (a) What factors led students to enroll in community college compared to a four-year institution? and (b) What factors led students to transfer to four-year institutions? Narratives of high-achieving first-generation Latina/o transfer students can equip educators, scholars, and policymakers with the knowledge and skills needed to assist other students from similar backgrounds follow in their footsteps.

Review of the literature

First-generation Latina/o college students

First-generation college students, those whose parents did not graduate from college, are disproportionately comprised of students of color (Choy, 2001). They are also more likely to be under-prepared academically, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, attend schools with limited resources, and speak English as a second language (Atherton, 2014; Balemian & Feng, 2013; Hudley et al., 2009; Jehangir, 2010). Compared to non-first generation college students, first-generation college students are also less likely to earn a postsecondary degree (Hudley et al., 2009; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Among first-generation college students, 57.3% are Latina/o compared to only 27% of African Americans and 10.5% of Whites (Eagan et al., 2017). Many first-generation Latina/o college students report not enrolling in advanced courses while in high school and also not understanding the impact enrollment could have on their college preparedness and the competitiveness of their college admissions applications (Atherton, 2014; Smith, 2009). Access to and enrollment in challenging courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) classes would afford these students the opportunity to prepare for college-level work (Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014; Moore & Slate, 2008). However, even when AP courses are offered, African American and Latina/o high school students may require support and encouragement from school personnel to enroll in them (Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Yamamura, 2007; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Gibbons and Borders (2010) explored the college-going expectations of prospective first-generation college students in middle school. They found that these students aspired to attend college but reported low college-going self-efficacy and greater perceived barriers to college enrollment when compared to their prospective non-first-generation college peers. The Latina/o prospective first-generation college students in the study reportedly felt unsupported by school personnel. Boden (2011) examined perceptions of academic preparedness among prospective first-generation Latina/o college students; she also discovered a strong desire to attend college among the study participants. However, contrary to the findings of Gibbons and Borders (2010), she noted that the participants felt they could overcome potential barriers to college attendance. The participants believed they were academically prepared for college because they developed a specific plan to attend college and explicated how to reach that goal. They also received guidance from family, friends, or school personnel, had strong academic, organizational, and time management skills, and the motivation to succeed in college (Boden, 2011). Similarly, Borrero (2011) highlighted the success stories of first-generation Latina/o students and found school, family, and community supports were also perceived as contributing to college success. These are critical areas that should be tapped into to increase college-going self-efficacy among first-generation Latina/o students.

Community college enrollment and transfer to four-year institutions

Community colleges play a significant role in increasing access to higher education for Latina/o students (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Núñez, Sparks, & Hernández, 2011); in 2013, 49% of Latinas/os were enrolled in two-year public institutions (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Many Latina/o students enroll in community college due to its low cost, flexible, and less complicated admissions procedures compared to four-year institutions, smaller class sizes, and accommodating class schedules for those with other needs and obligations (e.g., work, family) (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Eagan et al., 2017; Hernández, 2015; Liu, 2011; Núñez et al., 2011; Sáenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). However, low persistence and transfer rates demonstrate that while increased access to college is afforded, degree attainment is not certain (Baker, 2016; Mooring & Mooring, 2016). Data from the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09) showed that 48.8% of students attending community college with goals of transferring to four-year institutions did not earn a degree and were not enrolled in any institution of higher education six years later (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). Barriers to successful transfer to four-year institutions

include a lack of advisement, financial issues, and a lack of familial support (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012). Monaghan and Attewell (2015) also analyzed longitudinal data, which followed a nationally representative cohort of freshmen for six years. They found that only 58% of the community college students in their national sample successfully transferred most or all of their credits; these students were more likely to complete a baccalaureate degree compared to students who experienced significant credit loss upon transfer. Therefore, these factors must be considered when evaluating why students who intend to transfer to four-year institutions do or do not.

Undermatch

Even when Latina/o students are highly capable of attending four-year institutions, many choose to enroll in community colleges. As a result, an “undermatch,” which refers to the propensity for academically capable students, many of whom represent low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, to attend nonselective four-year institutions with low graduation rates, or two-year institutions where degree completion and transfer rates are even lower, occurs (Hurwitz, Smith, Howell, & Pender, 2012; Sherwin, 2012; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). An undermatch frequently occurs among Latina/o students because, due to a lack of guidance at the secondary level, they may be unfamiliar with the range of college choices and financial aid options available to them (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Rodriguez, 2015). Latina/o students evidence high aspirations for college enrollment and completion, however, only a small percentage of all Latina/o students who begin their studies at a community college transfer to a four-year institution and/or earn a bachelor’s degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Fry, 2004). Due to the significant proportion of Latina/o student enrollment in community colleges, the low transfer rate for those who intend to transfer presents a major concern (Dougherty, 2002). Thus, it is important for Latina/o students to be well-informed when making college choice decisions. Secondary schools must take a more active role in ensuring students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds (e.g., racial/ethnic minority, first-generation, undocumented), receive appropriate information about the college-going process (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015).

There is also a strong relationship between the selectivity level of a college and its degree completion rate (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). In general, students who enroll at more selective postsecondary institutions enjoy better outcomes in terms of degree completion rates and employment returns (e.g., higher income); nevertheless, it is not true that every student is best served by attending the most selective college at which he or she is qualified to attend (Hurwitz et al., 2012). Accordingly, while college match on the basis of academic skill is important, the focus should shift to getting students into institutions that they feel are the best fit. If the institutional match is a community college, then the focus should be on course completion to obtain an associate’s degree, transfer to a four-year institution to obtain a bachelor’s degree, and/or preparation for the workforce.

Methodology

A phenomenological study employing individual interviews was utilized to provide participants with the opportunity to discuss their educational experiences. It allowed the researcher to collect data reflective of the college choice and transfer decisions of the high-achieving first-generation Latina/o transfer students in the study.

Research site

The researcher selected a four-year university designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the Southwest to conduct the study. A Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) is an institution with an enrollment of undergraduate full-time-equivalent students that is at least 25% Hispanic. This

designation permits universities to apply for grants to expand educational opportunities and support for Hispanic students. In 2010, the selected research site was one of four institutions nationally recognized for academic policies and programs that serve Latina/o students. Subsequently, in 2012, the selected site received the HSI designation and Latina/o students represented 30% of the student body. Additionally, approximately 40% of the entering freshman class (2013–2014) was comprised of first-generation students. Therefore, the researcher felt this site would be appropriate to examine the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students.

Procedures

The researcher selected a purposeful sample (Patton, 2014) of 10 first-generation high-achieving Latina/o college undergraduate students for the larger study. To recruit participants for the study, the researcher obtained a directory of 1,012 students meeting the following criteria: junior or senior status, Hispanic/Latina/o, cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or higher, and first-generation (parents did not obtain a college degree) from the university's Office of Institutional Research (OIR). The researcher sent one recruitment email enclosing information about the purpose of the study to the list of students received from the OIR. The students who expressed an interest in the study and were available for an interview participated in the study. Four students contacted the researcher about participating in the study; however, they did not follow up with the researcher to schedule an interview appointment. Additionally, two students replied to the researcher's email indicating that they were not first-generation college students.

Participants

Eight female and two male students participated in the larger study. Eight of the 10 participants attended another postsecondary institution(s) prior to attending the selected site for this study. More specifically, six of the 10 participants began their postsecondary studies at a community college. Thus, data analysis focuses on the six participants who began their postsecondary education at a community college. Of those six participants, they were comprised of four female and two male students. Their ages ranged from 24 to 39 years old (mean age = 28.5 years old). Their cumulative GPA ranged from 3.68 to 4.0 (mean GPA = 3.84); three of the participants were juniors and three were seniors. Four participants (Edward, Jennifer, Louise, and Valerie) attended one community college prior to transferring to the study site. One participant (Isabel) attended a community college, transferred to a four-year public institution, returned to the same community college, and then enrolled in the study site. The final participant (Alex) attended two community colleges prior to transferring to the study site. Five of the six participants were born in the U.S. and five of the six participants worked while attending school (mean hours worked = 26.2 hours). See Table 1 for additional demographic information. The participants self-selected pseudonyms to protect their identity and maintain confidentiality. The researcher received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study.

Table 1. Demographic information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	GPA	Year	Major	Attendance at other institutions	Place of birth	Employment status
1. Alex	Male	39	3.75	Senior	Applied Arts & Science	Community college	Mexico	Works 50 hours/week
2. Edward	Male	32	3.7	Senior	English	Community college	Texas	Full time student
3. Isabel	Female	24	3.95	Senior	Pre-physical Therapy	4 year institution & community college	Texas	Works 24 hours/week
4. Jennifer	Female	25	4.0	Junior	Dietetics	Community college	Texas	Works 25 hours/week
5. Louise	Female	25	4.0	Junior	Criminal Justice	Community college	California	Works 22 hours/week
6. Valerie	Female	26	3.68	Junior	Pre-healthcare Administration	Community college	California	Works 10 hours/week

Data collection

The participants completed a background questionnaire to provide information such as place of birth, parent's place of birth, home language(s), race/ethnicity, first-generation status, year in school, major, cumulative grade point average, attendance at previous postsecondary institutions, and employment status. Each participant also completed an in-depth individual, face-to-face interview with the researcher, which lasted between 1 and 2½ hours. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol to examine issues of identity, high school experiences, the transition to college, and college experiences. Specific questions included, "Tell me about your experiences in high school"; "How did you access information about going to college?"; "Who helped you gather information about college (e.g., applying to college, completing financial aid forms)?" Participants received a \$10 gift card to a local grocery store upon completion of their interview. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by two graduate research assistants.

Data analysis

The researcher conducted data analysis utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This technique refers to the process of first reviewing each interview transcript and making notes about significant statements made by each participant. In this stage, the transcripts are each read and re-read multiple times to develop familiarity with the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Afterward, the researcher returns to the beginning of the transcripts and documents emerging themes. The researcher then created a list of emergent themes and identified patterns between them and grouped them together (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Next, the themes were grouped together under main themes and the emergent themes functioned as subthemes. The researcher identified participant quotes that represented these subthemes, which served as a way to insert the participants' voice and experiences. This process occurred with each transcript to identify new themes and repeating patterns in the data.

The researcher worked with a research team comprised of two graduate students. Prior to reviewing the data, the research team members were trained in IPA. Each team member individually engaged in the aforementioned process of data analysis and then met collectively to discuss patterns in the data. Patterns and emergent themes were identified, analyzed, and discussed, through this method of peer debriefing to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009). This process resulted in the discussion of divergent and convergent emergent themes, where the team members collectively selected the final themes on the basis of the significance of the participants' experiences. This form of triangulation (Patton, 2014) prevented potential researcher biases from entering the study by discussing findings from multiple perspectives (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Participants conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) via email; they reviewed their interview transcripts for clarity and accuracy. All of the participants indicated that their thoughts were conveyed accurately.

Researcher subjectivity

Researchers must systematically address their subjectivities to prevent them from interfering with the research process (Peshkin, 1988). The research team members for this study note their positionalities in relation to the research. The researcher is of Latina/o descent and was also a first-generation college student. The two graduate students were also first-generation Latina/o college students with an interest and familiarity with research on educational issues related to Latinas/os. The research team members assessed his/her own personal experiences to ensure it did not interfere with the study by engaging in reflexivity (Creswell, 2013). Upon development of the study, the researcher expected that the participants had a smooth trajectory to college that facilitated their high-achieving status. More specifically, the researcher assumed, on the basis of her own personal experiences and existing literature on this topic, that the participants would be high-achievers in high school, received high levels of support from school personnel

in applying for college, entered college immediately following high school graduation, and continued to perform highly in college. Nonetheless, the findings indicated that the participants' educational trajectory was not simple and the research team allowed the data to tell the participants' story rather than permit the assumptions to guide the research.

Results

Four themes emerged from data analysis to explain the factors that influenced college choice decisions to enroll in community college: (a) Inadequate Guidance from School Personnel, (b) Financial Concerns, (c) Familial Factors, and (4) Community College as an Appropriate Match. Two themes related to the decision to transfer to a four-year institution: (a) Access to Greater Opportunities, and (b) Support and Motivation.

Community college enrollment

The participants in the study expressed high aspirations for college enrollment; many discussed how they knew college was the next step for them. A variety of reasons explained their decision to begin their postsecondary education at a community college instead of a four-year institution such as being uninformed about the college admissions process due to a lack of guidance from school personnel, financial concerns, familial reasons, and community college being the best fit.

Inadequate guidance from school personnel

Jennifer aspired to attend college and shared that she knew she would attend college; however, she communicated her frustration when asked how she made the decision to attend college. She realized her peers were off touring college campuses and she had no idea how to apply for college. Jennifer stated, "I didn't know what I was doing. Nobody was telling me, 'This is how you apply for college.' I felt it could have been better as far as college prep because I was totally lost in that sense." In response to the awareness that she was not prepared to apply to a four-year institution, she received the following advice, "If you're not applying to any universities, the local community college is a really good place to start."

Edward worked a few years after high school graduation before enrolling in community college. He reported, "...I just started working and got myself becoming a working guy and then at some point I was like, 'Well let me try this school thing.'" Edward did not feel the school staff at his high school actively promoted postsecondary attendance. He related, "I kind of think they had [school personnel] an idea of who was going and who wasn't [going to college]." For these participants, a lack of guidance steered Jennifer toward community college and Edward toward the workforce before deciding he could be successful in college.

Financial concerns

Isabel was a high-achieving student in high school; she attended a magnet high school and took several advanced courses. Nonetheless, she enrolled in a community college following high school graduation. When asked about her decision-making process to attend college, she shared, "My brother was definitely pushing me towards that [a four-year institution], but I didn't want to just because I knew it was more expensive." Isabel had concerns that college would be costly for her parents and did not explore scholarships or aid that would reduce the cost of attendance at a four-year institution. None of the other participants reported going to community college due to financial barriers.

Familial factors

Louise had a clear plan to attend a four-year university, but life events took her on a different path. She stated, “I always knew that I wanted to go to college.” Unlike Jennifer and Edward, her high school experience played a significant role in this goal. Louise mentioned, “We would go on field trips to different universities since there were quite a few in the area. . . I think that really shaped my ideas about college and wanting to go to college.” She developed a plan to attend college, however, during her freshman year of high school, her mom passed away and then in the middle of her senior year, her father moved her family to a different state due to financial matters. Louise reported dealing with depression upon relocating; she was formerly an “A” student, but performed poorly in her new school. Instead of going straight to college, she began working after she graduated from high school and took an additional year off before deciding to apply to community college. The combination of Louise’s mother passing away and her father moving her family to another state delayed her entering any postsecondary institution.

Valerie also had high aspirations for going to college; yet, familial issues prevented her from attending a four-year institution. She explained, “I had been accepted to college but my mom basically said I couldn’t leave for college and she wasn’t going to pay for it.” Valerie ended up moving out of her house and traveling to Spain with a boyfriend for two years. During this time, she reportedly did not speak to her mother. Upon returning to the U.S., she enrolled in community college part-time and worked full-time. The familial conflict Valerie experienced caused a rift in the relationship with her mother and also delayed her entrance to college.

Community college as an appropriate match

Alex’s situation was distinct from the other participants; he was born and raised in Mexico and experienced challenges in seeking a postsecondary education. He came to the U.S. when he was 21 years old for what he called “an adventure.” Alex indicated that he did not speak any English and “started buying courses [English] on videotape and picked up books from the library. I went to community college to start learning English by taking ESL classes.” He also completed his General Education Diploma (GED), but was unable to enroll in core courses at the community college “because I couldn’t pass the test [placement exam]; it was reading, writing, and math at the college level and I didn’t have any of that basic stuff at the beginning.” He shared that, “I took every possible level of developmental classes that they had, I guess they were about to invent more levels for me!” Alex indicated that he took the placement exam about four to five times before passing it and completing his associate’s degree in construction management. Thus, his reasoning for attending community college differed greatly from the other participants.

Transferring to a four-year institution

The participants described why they decided to continue their education and transfer to a four-year institution; for almost all of the participants, the reason was a clear understanding of the need for a higher level of education to provide them access to more opportunities and secure a better quality of life in the future. Additionally, the participants mentioned the support and encouragement from other persons in their lives as a motivating factor to continue their education.

Access to greater opportunities

Valerie shared her decision to transfer out of a community college to a four-year institution in another state,

I was getting older and my peers were graduating from grad school or nursing school and getting married and buying houses and going on way more trips than I could in a year. . . I just thought if I’m not going to do this now, when am I even going to? I didn’t want to be 36 and still not be done. I really was thinking more long-term.

She also discussed the struggles her mother encountered in her life and shared not wanting the same kind of life. Valerie explained, “I like to travel, and I want certain comforts. I know that the only way to have that is through an education. . . Education can really change a lot of things for people.” She eventually reconciled with her mother, but indicated that her mother did not understand why she needed to go to school out of state. Although her mother disapproved of her leaving home for college, Valerie understood the need to further her education to improve her quality of life. Nonetheless, her mother was supportive of her plan to attend college and complete her degree. Similarly, Isabel, who first attended community college, transferred to a four-year institution, and then returned to the community college and completed her associate’s degree, explained that she needed a change. In her final year of community college, she realized it was time to advance her education. Isabel explained, “I wasn’t satisfied with just getting by. I think my parents really did set a good example. I really do think about having a better quality of life.”

Jennifer searched online for universities that had nutrition programs and found “that the community college has a program where you can do half your courses at the community college and half your courses at this university.” Thus, her courses would transfer from the community college, so she could complete a bachelor’s degree and start her career. Jennifer felt that completing her bachelor’s degree “would be a big sense of accomplishment.” She also added that, “I’ve gone this far already, it would be stupid to just quit. But more than anything that feeling of accomplishment, like I did something, did it all on my own. I think that’s what motivates me the most.” Alex also found an optimal degree program; he shared,

The main reason was because they [the four-year institution] were willing to take life experience credits. My degree allowed me to get life experience credits, which meant everything I did at work I was able to document and apply for credits and the max you can get is 24 credits, which is a lot.

Similar to the other participants, Alex also wanted a better future for himself and his family, as he was a husband and father of two young children. He reported,

If I want to keep the same style of life that I have right now, then I have to finish school because if I leave this job or they let me go right now with no degrees then I will not be able to find a job that pays as much as I make now.

Support and motivation

For Edward and Louise, they had people in their lives that supported and encouraged their desire to go to college and further their education. Edward had a friend who attended the same four-year university and influenced his decision to transfer there. He also felt that continuing his education would benefit his life in various ways, “Just to become a better person, become a better me every year, to constantly challenge myself, to step out of my comfort zone, to see it through, to just keep bettering myself, to not limit myself, to graduate.” Louise lived with a friend and her friend’s family and they encouraged her to pursue her bachelor’s degree. She was also self-motivated to persist in college, “I do have that expectation for myself and I don’t expect anything less.”

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the participants aspired to attend college; however, various factors prevented their immediate enrollment at four-year institutions. The participants’ reasons for initially attending a community college included a lack of information about applying to college (Becerra, 2012), financial concerns (McDonough & Calderone, 2006), familial reasons (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012), and community college being the right match. An undermatch was present for some of the participants; as first-generation college students, many reportedly lacked guidance and felt underprepared to make informed college-related decisions. Nonetheless, considering the low community college to four-year institutions transfer rates (Baker, 2016; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Mooring & Mooring, 2016), this study finds the paradox of undermatching. The participants demonstrated resilience in utilizing community college as a stepping-stone to transfer to a four-year institution. Despite their aptitude to attend four-year institutions following

high school, community college enrollment provided the participants with the opportunity to invest in a higher education and continue their education at a four-year institution.

Study participants indicated that their primary motivation for transferring to four-year institutions was to create a pathway for a successful future (Boden, 2011). The participants sought to improve their quality of life and understood the importance of a college degree in achieving that goal. Zell (2010) found similar results among the participants in her study concerning the relationship between psychological experiences of Latina/o community college students and persistence in reaching their postsecondary goals. The participants reported a sense of purpose and increased self-efficacy by persisting in college; they felt college success would enable them to make “meaningful contributions” to their families, communities, and to society (Zell, 2010, p. 176). Additionally, support and encouragement from friends and family was beneficial for the participants in the current study. As documented in extant literature (Boden, 2011; Borrero, 2011; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Zell, 2010), support systems are often very influential in college persistence.

Implications for practice

From the participant’s responses and existing data on Latina/o college graduation rates, first-generation college student graduation rates, and transfer rates from community colleges, it is evident that there is a clear need to help these students enroll in college and persist through graduation, however the question remains as to how to get them there. College information is available through various means (e.g., internet, school counselors); nevertheless, the accessibility of this information is questionable (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). There is a need for secondary school leaders (e.g., principal) to examine how school counselors are utilized as many get caught up with administrative duties, have high caseloads, and not enough time to spend with students on college and career counseling (Martinez & Welton, 2012; McKillip et al., 2012). First-generation Latina/o students would strongly benefit from individualized college and career counseling that should be provided early in their secondary education, frequently and repeatedly, and focus on a variety of topics including applying to college, entrance exam preparation, applying for financial aid and paying for college, and how to successfully navigate college (McKillip et al., 2012; National Office of School Counselor Advocacy, 2010).

Facilitating the transfer process from community college to a four-year institution is also necessary. Community colleges serve as the gateway to four-year institutions for a small number of Latina/o students (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Fry, 2004). Recommendations for improved transfer rates and creating a transfer culture at community colleges include developing partnerships and articulation agreements between community college and four-year universities (Pérez & Ceja, 2010). These agreements are beneficial in outlining what courses are required to facilitate the transfer process and degree completion at the cooperating four-year institution. In this study, Jennifer benefitted from being able to transfer her community college credits toward the degree program at the four-year institution and Alex earned life credits for enrolling in a degree program that accepted credit based on documented work experience. Similar university programs and agreements may help community college students successfully complete their degree.

Advising is also essential to facilitate the successful transfer for these students (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013). As with advising at the secondary level, it should occur frequently and early on in the students’ postsecondary enrollment. Additionally, information on transfer options, requirements, and financial aid should be readily available for students. Community colleges can host events such as workshops and/or forums to address the aforementioned topics (Zell, 2010). These events can also include current and former students as co-presenters to share their experiences and encourage other students to seek advising and guidance (Zell, 2010). Finally, the development of mentorship programs that provide Latina/o students with access to Latina/o peers, staff, and/or faculty may be beneficial (Crisp, 2010; Tovar, 2015). These persons can serve as potential role models to other first-generation Latina/o college students. Admissions offices at community college campuses can designate a specific team of staff to target resources to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions.

Mentoring and academic and career counseling are also important supports to aid in retaining, graduating, and transferring students (Tovar, 2015).

Limitations and future directions

Limitations of this study include the self-report nature since it relied on student interviews. The sampling procedure solicited volunteers, thus, it is possible that those who self-selected to participate differed from those who did not volunteer. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and sample size, the results are not generalizable to the population. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate areas for future study; limited research exists specifically for high-achieving first-generation Latina/o students, thus, this investigation provides preliminary data and the foundation for future research. For instance, a longitudinal study following students from college enrollment to graduation would be beneficial in understanding the challenges and the support factors that help these students successfully graduate from college. Additionally, the inclusion of a more diverse sample (e.g., GPA, place of birth, country of origin, transfer versus non-transfer students, institution type, age, high school attended, etc.) may be helpful in examining differences between groups of students.

The concept of undermatch should continue to be investigated to explore the relationship between academic success among students who attend a less selective institution (i.e., community college) and transfer to a four-year institution such as the students in this study. Moreover, the paradox of undermatch must be examined as community college removed the barrier to attending college and facilitated entry into a four-year institution. Research has documented that students of color including Latina/o and African American students enrolled at highly selective institutions and predominantly White institutions often experience a hostile campus climate inclusive of racism, microaggressions, and isolation, which in turn negatively impacts motivation and academic success (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Lopez, 2005; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010). Therefore, the most selective institution may not always be the best match for students despite their capability.

The role of attending a HSI did not emerge as a major theme in the study; nonetheless, institution type may potentially influence the success of first-generation Latina/o students and should be examined more closely (Laden, 2004). Research has demonstrated positive experiences among Latina/o students at HSIs compared to non-HSIs including fewer reports of discrimination, higher levels of academic self-concept, and greater engagement in the community (Cuellar, 2014, 2015; Hurtado, 1994). Various reasons may explain the lack of relevance of the HSI designation for the study participants including not being aware of the status since at the time of the study the university had only been an HSI for one year (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010). Moreover, while Latinas/os represented 30% of the university population, they were still the minority on campus, making it likely that the participants were enrolled in classes and in spaces where they did not see or come into contact with many other Latina/o students. Additionally, HSIs vary with regard to resources and supports available to Latina/o students, which may influence graduation rates (Nuñez, 2015); therefore, much remains to be known about the impact of HSIs and persistence of Latina/o students (Nora & Crisp, 2012).

Conclusion

The high-achieving first-generation Latina/o students in the study aspired to attend college and shared their stories of community college enrollment and decisions to transfer to a four-year institution. Numerous factors led to enrollment at community college, nevertheless, these students persevered to transfer to four-year institutions. Community college enrollment broke down barriers to college access and functioned as a gateway to the baccalaureate. Educators, researchers, and policymakers must continue to develop ways for these students to realize their potential through access to a higher education.

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