

**Retaining Latino and Non-Latino College Students:
Key Similarities and Differences**

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*A Report for the Serna Center and the
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Abstract

Much recent scholarship has considered the persistent gap in college completion rates between Latino and non-Latino students. This gap is widely seen as a major American social problem given the well documented community and personal benefits of a baccalaureate degree, and the growing share of society that is Latino in background. Yet while many important findings have been reported, the extant literature suffers from two problems: 1) there is often a lack of clarity about *how* ethnicity might influence college completion rates; and 2) many studies are *not comparative* in nature, leading to weak inferences about the impact of ethnicity.

I attempt to address both problems in the present critical review of the literature. First, I identify three different types of explanations as to how ethnicity might affect college completion. Second, I identify a number of specific conclusions in each of these areas that can be drawn from the extant literature. In particular, I suggest that the most well supported conclusions pertain to the impact of the average socio-economic status of Latinos relative to non-Latinos. By contrast, arguments about cultural differences (especially pertaining to family relations) and campus climate are provocative but less well supported. Additionally, despite a few claims to the contrary, my review indicates that commonly used college retention models are as applicable to Latino students as non-Latinos. The conclusion to the paper identifies implications for policy and further research.

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I. The Challenge: Understanding How Latinos Compare to Other Students With Respect to College Persistence

Imagine the following. You are a university administrator, a faculty department chair, or a legislative staff member with responsibility for addressing concerns about the large proportion of students leaving college without obtaining a baccalaureate degree.¹ You are aware of a number of relevant facts about ethnicity and persistence in higher education in the United States. For example, you know that much of the influential research on retention was developed at a time when college student populations largely consisted of non-Latino whites. You are highly conscious that the Latino share of the college population has grown sharply over the past couple of decades, even though it may not be proportionate to Latinos share of the overall population. You also recall reading that the college dropout rate for Latinos remains higher than for other groups. But you are not sure what all this information implies for programs aimed at encouraging persistence to the baccalaureate degree. Do models of college retention developed in earlier periods still apply when the student body is made up heavily of students of color? To what extent do Latinos have unique needs that affect persistence in college? What sorts of responses to such needs are appropriate?

This paper addresses questions such as those posed previously. My aim is to provide useful, general information about similarities and differences

¹ There are other important retention questions, such as persistence toward an associate (AA) degree, successful transfer from community college to a baccalaureate granting institution, and persistence toward a graduate degree. However, this study concentrates on persistence toward a BA both because of its intrinsic importance and because the bulk of the of the extant research focuses on that question.

between Latinos and non-Latinos with respect to persistence in college, appropriate to a broad range of people who might have reason to be concerned about college retention. My secondary aim is to evaluate whether existing research has provided sufficient guidance for educators and policy makers and, to the extent it has not, suggest appropriate future research efforts. My information comes from a review of prior studies rather than original research. I approach the topic as an interested outsider—until recently the substantive focus of my research has not been on higher education. But I also approach this topic as a social scientist cognizant of the strengths and weaknesses of different research designs. My interpretation of the literature is informed by that orientation, as some of the extant research is much superior to other studies with respect to drawing well supported inferences about the impact of ethnicity on college retention.

There is no debate that understanding college retention in the United States is of major importance, as evidenced by the enormous amount of academic research that has been devoted to this topic. The reasons for this attention are readily apparent. From a collective perspective, numerous reports have shown that the portion of adults completing higher education is important to economic competitiveness (for a summary of the literature see Shulock and Moore 2007). Enhanced college completion rates may have other social benefits as well such as enhancing worker productivity, increasing tax revenues, enhancing the workforce's ability to adapt to and use technology, increasing community service, and reducing dependence on public services (see for

example Institute for Higher Education Policy 1998; Vernez and Mizell 2001). From the perspective of the impact on individual lives: “Study after study has indicated that people with bachelor’s degrees have better health, more rewarding employment, more financial security, and greater satisfaction with their lives than do people who never achieve the degree” (California State University Task Force on Facilitating Graduation, or CSU Task Force, 2002, p. 2). Yet research also has underscored the conclusion that the United States generally, and California specifically, has a major problem with respect to college students completing their degrees. Studies demonstrate that up 30% or more of people attending institutions such as the California State University campus never receive their degrees, and international data suggest that the United States lags behind other advanced nations in terms of the portion of undergraduates obtaining a baccalaureate (CSU Task Force 2002; Shulock and Moore 2007, p. 2).

It is also readily evident that while there remains vigorous debate within academia about specific factors that influence college retention, and their applicability in different circumstances, there is considerable consensus about key influences on persistence in higher education. Indeed, many comprehensive reports aimed at providing guidance for improving graduation rates, such as that of the CSU Task Force report, were built on recognition of these consensus factors (solid academic preparation for college in secondary school, engaging students in campus life, allocating sufficient financial aid, etc.). Furthermore, there are widely used causal models of college persistence that are traceable to the landmark work on college retention in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars such

as Vincent Tinto, emphasizing such considerations as academic and social integration into college (for a summary see Tinto 1998). For example, Judith Stoecker and her colleagues (1988) used a version of Tinto's original model for a multi-year, longitudinal study of college persistence across different academic institutions, with persistence seen as a function of student pre-college characteristics (e.g., family socioeconomic status and secondary school academic record), student college goals, institutional characteristics, college major, and academic and social integration. They found a variety of indirect and direct effects on whether or not someone obtained a bachelor's degree.

Additionally, there is considerable interest in retention of Latino students specifically (for an overview of much of the literature, see Hernandez and Lopez 2004). No doubt this is grounded in widespread perception of a major social problem, especially given the rapidly growing portion of American society that is Latino in background. Scholars commonly cite stark statistics related to college graduation rates for different ethnic groups. For example, drawing from 2005 census data, David León and Carlos Nevarez (2007, p. 361) stress that only 12% of Latinos aged 25 or over had received at least a bachelor's degree, in contrast to 18% of African Americans and 30% of non-Latino Caucasians. Many academic articles, papers, and conferences have focused on understanding why Latino undergraduates do or do not obtain a baccalaureate. The question is what key themes we can take away from these and other studies, especially with respect to tailoring what is more broadly known about college retention. **This question is made more difficult to address because many of the prior**

studies suffer from a serious research design flaw, at least if one's aim is to be confident about any conclusions about the impact of ethnic differences: much of the extant research fails to make explicit and systematic *comparisons* between Latinos and other groups.²

Research that does not make such comparisons may nevertheless be valuable for suggesting hypotheses. For example, imagine that a qualitative study focusing exclusively on a small group of Latino students found that a particular family related consideration turned out to be surprisingly important in influencing whether they planned to remain in college. In part because it was surprising, such a finding might suggest that this particular factor was more important for Latinos than others. Nevertheless, absent systematic comparisons there is no way to be sure if this is the case, and any causal inferences about the impact of ethnicity are suspect (on the requisites for drawing causal inferences in both qualitative and quantitative research, see especially King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).

II. Clarifying Why Ethnicity Might Affect College Retention

Before turning to specific themes that can be derived from the literature,

I wish to clarify *why* ethnicity might affect persistence in higher education. Given the focus of this essay, the issue in particular is why being Latino might affect

² It is not simply the primary research that suffers from this problem: it is characteristic as well of much of the secondary literature summarizing results from prior studies. For example, the literature review on Latino college retention by Hernandez and Lopez (2004) ranks as perhaps the most comprehensive of its kind, summarizing findings in a wide variety of areas. While this review is quite helpful, the authors do not consistently distinguish between factors that explain variance in college persistence *within* the Latino student population (and might therefore plausibly explain variance within other ethnic group populations) and factors that might explain differences in college persistence *between* Latinos and other groups.

whether or not students remain in college. The empirical academic retention literature sometimes includes ethnicity dummy variables, and sometimes divides discussion of persistence patterns by racial groupings (e.g., the previously referenced study by Stoecker et al. divides the analysis of college persistence into four groups: black men, black women, white women, and white men). It is also common to emphasize differences in aggregate college persistence across ethnic groups, and the relative low retention rate for many ethnic minorities. However, the literature is frequently less clear about the *reasons* ethnicity might affect higher education outcomes. Yet one may offer quite different stories about the impact of ethnicity on college persistence. Some possible explanations in fact attribute nothing causal to the ethnicity variable per se; instead, the Latino variable is simply a proxy for differences in influential background characteristics that are unequally divided across ethnic groups. Other explanations attribute causal importance to being Latino per se, either because of something about Latino students themselves or something about the reaction to Latinos by other students or college faculty and/or administrators.

The ambiguity of ethnic categories further complicates analysis. It is common for researchers to treat ethnicity as a demographic variable, reflecting student self-reports of their background. Yet some research suggests that the extent of *psychological* identification with being Latino or non-Latino may be the more important consideration. Accordingly, some studies have found that ethnicity has a larger impact on educational outcomes when measured in terms of psychological identification rather than demographic background (for a

thoughtful consideration of the difference between these approaches, see Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra 1991).

With the above caveat noted, it is possible to discern at least three types of arguments from the literature regarding the impact of ethnicity on college retention. A first type attributes difference in retention outcomes—and the lower graduation rates of Latinos specifically-- to *variance in the average social and economic background of Latinos who attend college relative to non-Latinos*. I will term this the SES (socio-economic status) type of explanation. That is, aside from background characteristics there is nothing inherent in being Latino, or the way institutions of higher education respond to Latino students, that make such students less likely to complete a degree. Instead, differences in outcomes are attributable to Latino students tending to arrive at college with characteristics that make them more vulnerable to stress and other problems that impede degree completion. Such characteristics could include, among other things, fewer financial resources, greater obligations to work and be self supporting, and less solid academic preparation for college as the result of attending weaker elementary and secondary schools. I will explore the evidence for such claims later in this paper. For now, it is worth emphasizing that implicit in the SES explanation is the notion that similarly situated non-Latino students (e.g., non-Latino Caucasians) would face similar challenges with respect to degree completion.

A second type of explanation is that there may be *cultural differences between Latino and non-Latino students* that, at least in part, explain different

outcomes. It is tricky to attribute variance in educational results to cultural differences, especially given the heterogeneity of the general Latino population, and Latino college student population (on such heterogeneity, see for example Hernandez and Lopez 2004). Nevertheless, based on some prior research it is at least plausible that cultural differences might partially explain educational outcome divergence. However, it is not clear whether factors attributable to “Latino culture” make students *more* or *less* likely to persist through graduation, *other things equal*.

It is notable that some earlier work claimed that Latino parents placed a relatively low value on obtaining higher education, and transmitted these values to their children. If true, this “cultural deficit” argument (as it came to be known) might conceivably help to explain decisions to persist in college as well as decisions to attend college in the first place. However, more recent research has tended to discredit these broad “cultural deficit” claims. Several studies have found that Latino parents do place a high value on education (for a summary of the earlier scholarship and more recent research, see Ceja 2004).

Aside from more sweeping claims about how education is valued, it is possible that more subtle cultural attributes affect educational outcomes across ethnic groups. In particular, much prior work has stressed a tendency for Latino culture to stress strong family ties (Hernandez 2000; Hernandez and Lopez 2004). Such ties may in part explain different outcomes either directly (e.g., through divergence in how committed students are to completing higher education as a function of perceived obligations to family as opposed to

furthering their own needs and careers) or indirectly (e.g., through the choice of what type of institution to attend, such as a four year college versus a community college, given what is known about how the former route makes obtaining a BA more likely). Such psychological factors and choices of educational institutions may in turn influence the likelihood of baccalaureate degree completion. Note however: in the real world it may be hard to separate cultural from SES related explanations of decisions to persist or drop-out. For example, if a Latino student drops out of college because a close relative loses a job and the student is needed to help support the family, is it a sign of relatively high family obligations or greater family vulnerability to fiscal stress?³

A third type of explanation focuses not on Latino students themselves but on *campus climate*. One set of arguments focuses on environment characterized by prejudice and discrimination against Latinos (see for example Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005). Included in this type are claims about “institutional racism,” i.e., a social system that may be largely invisible but acts to privilege members of some groups while disadvantaging others (for a discussion of institutional racism arguments and how they might apply in the context of Latino student retention, see Figueroa 2007). Another aspect related to racial climate may be the presence of a sufficiently sized Latino community on a largely white campus to make Latino students feel comfortable (Hernandez and Lopez 2004, pp. 44-45). Racial climate explanations are intuitively plausible given the facts that higher education in the United States traditionally catered disproportionately to non-Latino whites, and that college administrators and faculty have been (and

³ I am grateful to Tom Lascher for prompting me to think about this distinction.

remain) disproportionately Caucasian. Campus climate explanations might therefore help to account for differences in Latino retention rates even controlling for SES factors.

It is worth mentioning that there is one other line of argument in a small portion of the extant literature on college retention for ethnic minorities that is difficult to classify with the framework I have provided. This line of argument suggests that existing models and information about college persistence for racial minorities, developed for analysis of student bodies that were largely white, is simply “culture bound” and irrelevant to the experiences of the large numbers of racial minority students who frequently attend college in today’s world (e.g. Tierney 1992). Such an argument might appear to be a mixture of the campus climate and cultural type of explanations to which I referred earlier, although the nature of the mix is unclear. Thus one recent study of Latino college retention argued that: “The use of models and theories created for majority students is well intentioned, yet it may not be appropriate” (Torres 2006). To the extent such arguments are accurate they may imply the need for a radical restructuring of retention programs to accommodate the needs of large groups of ethnic minority students.

Some versions of “critical race theory” also appear to imply that existing models of retention are in major part irrelevant to Latinos, because the relatively low level of Latino college achievement is largely attributable to systematic racism that overwhelms other factors and must be overcome if more Latinos are to make it to college, persist to a college degree, etc. Thus in a recent review of

the literature on the college success of Latinos adopting an explicit critical race theory perspective, Daniel Sólorzano and his colleagues (2005, p. 289) write: “[A]lthough there are many factors that may have influenced the lack of educational attainment and progress for Latina/o college students, most of the responsibility lies in the racialized [sic] structures, policies, and practices that guide higher education.” Naturally, any such claim ultimately is subject to empirical verification, although doing so may be difficult given the broad nature of this line of argument.

In short, scholars and practitioners offer a number of different reasons for the gap between Latino and non-Latino college retention rates. However, the literature often has not clearly distinguished among explanations that focus on the average background characteristics of Latino college students (i.e., SES and cultural explanations), and those that focus more on experiences of Latinos in college as a group (i.e., campus climate explanations). Yet there are quite different practical implications for the different types of explanations, in terms of whether colleges and universities need to offer a different *mix* of retention strategies that may be appropriate to all students in certain circumstances, or use different strategies altogether for Latino students.

III. Key Conclusions from a Review of the Literature

I turn now to major conclusions from the literature that, at a minimum, touches on college retention of Latinos and non-Latinos. An attempt will be made to highlight findings that cut across various research projects, and especially those that are supported by well designed empirical studies. Regarding specific

differences between Latinos and non-Latinos that influence college persistence, the most well supported conclusions fall in the area of socio-economic status; studies in the areas of the impact of culture and campus climate suffer from greater research design problems.

Conclusion 1: The college retention gap between Latinos and non-Latinos is real.

Numerous studies from different time periods, and using different data, have shown that those Latinos who attend college are less likely to obtain a baccalaureate degree than other students, and that this gap has persisted into the 21st century (Chapa and De La Rosa 2004; Fry 2002; Hernandez and Lopez 2004; Nora and Cabrera 1996; Porter 1990; Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra 1991; Romo and Salas 2003; Santiago 2006; Sullivan 2007). It should be noted that some studies have found a significant gap even when disaggregating the types of schools students attend, such as separating those who attend private and public institutions (Porter 1990).

Conclusion 2: There is strong reason to believe the general models used and main factors identified to explain college retention apply to Latino students.

This point should be broadly reassuring to people involved in college retention programs, since many of the main approaches were developed when Latinos constituted a much smaller share of the collegiate population. As indicated in the previous section of this report, it is also a point that is challenged by a portion of the literature. However, arguments that existing models of college persistence are not applicable to Latino students and other students of color because they are “culture bound” come from scholarship that either fails to offer systematic

empirical evidence (e.g., Tierney 1992) or is based on a design that fails to make systematic comparisons across ethnic groups (e.g., Torres 2006). More appropriately designed empirical research does *not* support the conclusion that college persistence models apply only to white, non-Latino students who were predominant in American colleges at the time much of the formative research on retention was being conducted (see especially Allen 1999; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pacarella, and Hagedorn 1999; Eimers and Pike 1997; Nora and Cabrera 1996; Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfe 1988).

A 1999 study by David Allen is especially important in underscoring the theme of the applicability of retention models to Latino students. He studied college persistence among students at a large, regional public four year institution in the Southwest, where Latinos constituted the largest ethnic minority group, using a model grounded in the general literature conducted by Tinto and others. As Allen rightly stressed, if the notion that retention models were only applicable to non-minority students was accurate, he should have found that the model he used accounted for little of the variation in academic persistence among minority students-- and definitely less than the variation than among white, non-Latino students. In fact, he found the opposite. Allen's retention model actually explained significantly *more* of the variation in persistence among minority students than in persistence among white students (for similar findings with respect to the relatively higher amount of retention variation explained for

minority students with existing retention models, see Eimers and Pike 1997; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pacarella, and Hagedorn 1999)⁴

It may well be that some variables missing from widely used retention models are important to Latino college retention. And as subsequent discussion will make clear, the average *values* of certain variables known to influence college persistence are different for Latinos than for other students of other ethnicities. But that is quite different from arguing that existing retention models do not apply.

Conclusion 3: Latino college students tend to come from lower socio-economic status backgrounds, and this has a variety of mostly negative effects on their college persistence.

The literature provides consistent and compelling evidence to suggest that, especially relative to white students, Latino college students disproportionately come from low SES backgrounds. For example, research on financing college education based on the 1995-96 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (King 1999) found that Latino (and African American and Native American) college students were significantly poorer in background than white college students. Accordingly, the expected family contribution to higher education was relatively low for Latino students. The income data are of major importance for college retention because general work on college retention has shown a strong,

⁴ It may be interesting to note the results of another study comparing the persistence of Latinos and non-Latino whites that was not strictly aimed at applying commonly used retention models, but did include some of the variables commonly used in those models such as high school grade point average, whether or not a college preparatory curriculum was taken in high school, and current grade point average in college (Canabal 1995). Statistical analysis showed that as a group the variables considered actually explained more of the variance in retention of Latinos than in retention of whites (i.e., the R^2 statistic was higher for the former group).

positive relationship between family income and persistence to a baccalaureate degree (Mortensen 2007). Additionally, research consistently indicates that the parental education of Latino students tends to be relatively low (e.g., Vernez and Mizell 2001). For example, a study of college students in Illinois found that 41% of the mothers of Hispanic students did not graduate from high school, as opposed to 6% of the mothers of non-Hispanic white students (Canabal 1995).

A number of more specific factors influencing retention follow at least in part from the SES difference, and are emphasized in the literature. These include the following:

Conclusion 3.1: A significantly higher portion of Latino students than other students enroll in community colleges, and this also affects the long-term likelihood of obtaining a baccalaureate degree.

Studies using a variety of data sources have found that a much higher portion of Latino college students are enrolled in community colleges than is the case for other college students (Fry 2002; Hagedorn and Lester 2006; Hernandez and Lopez 2004; King 1999; Nevarez 2007; Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra 1991; Romo and Salas 2003; Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera 2005; Sullivan 2007). One study based on Current Population Survey data found that among young adults there was a 14 percentage point gap between the portion of Latino undergraduates attending two year colleges and the portion of white and black undergraduates doing so (Fry 2002); if older adults are included, the gap

may be larger still. This is important for propensity to obtain a baccalaureate because studies show that degree completion lags for students who originally attend a community college (Fry 2002). There is reason to believe that Latinos' disproportionate enrollment in community college is influenced by factors other than cost (e.g., proximity to family), especially since African American college students are comparable to Latinos in terms of SES but much less concentrated in community colleges (see especially Fry 2002). Nevertheless, there is also widespread consensus that Latinos' propensity to attend community colleges is driven in significant part by their relatively low cost. Thus one national study found that *all* college students tend to be reluctant to take on debt to pay for college. Despite their relatively low SES on average, Latinos are able to avoid debt by disproportionately enrolling in low cost institutions such as community colleges (King 1999).

Conclusion 3.2: On average, Latinos experience more financial stress while attending college than do non-Latinos.

Stress about financing a college degree has been shown to affect college persistence for college students in general (see Nora, Barlow, and Crisp 2006). Furthermore, this is an area in which there has been thorough, comparative research. Stephen Quintana and his colleagues (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 44 studies on various types of stress among college students; most of these studies compared Latinos to non-Latino Anglos. They found that Latinos experienced more financial stress,

although the difference across racial groups was small. Similarly, a more recent study comparing Latinos and non-Latinos at a single campus found that Latinos were significantly more likely to report working more hours per week and significantly more likely to attribute a decision to leave college to an inability to afford continuing in higher education (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, and Alatorre 2004).

Conclusion 4: There is strong reason to believe that extensive financial aid can reduce the retention gap between Latinos and non-Latinos.

The evidence for the above conclusion comes from different types of studies. First, systematic research on college persistence *within* the Latino population has found financial aid had a significant, positive effect on college persistence, rivaling or exceeding the importance of other factors commonly included in higher education retention models such as undergraduate academic record and college grades (Nora 1990). Furthermore, a multiple year study of full-time, Indiana undergraduate students enrolled in public universities found that students receiving aid were more likely to persist than those not receiving aid (Hu and St. John 2001; see also Nora, Barlow, and Crisp 2006 for similar findings). Most importantly, that study also found that once receipt of financial assistance was controlled, there were no significant differences across ethnic groups (Latinos, African Americans, and whites) in the probability of persisting among students with otherwise similar characteristics (e.g., student background information, college grades). But since in general other factors are *not* equivalent across social groups, and Latinos are on average in more financial need, it stands to

reason that an across-the-board increase in financial aid would tend to lower the retention gap.

Conclusion 5: There is compelling evidence that on average Latino students enter college with weaker academic preparation than non-Latino students, and this influences persistence in higher education.

Much of the retention literature emphasizes the critical importance of academic preparation (e.g. CSU Task Force 2002), and the literature addressing Latino college persistence commonly emphasize that Latinos tend to rank relatively low on measures of academic preparation. For example, a recent, national study (ACT 2007) showed that while Latinos had made gains in recent years, they lagged in double digit percentages behind other high school graduates with respect to meeting ACT-Tested benchmarks in each of the four areas tested (English, mathematics, reading, and science). Additionally, a study of academic performance within the huge Los Angeles Unified School District found that Latinos on average ranked about 200 points below non-Latino white students on the California Academic Performance Index (API) in recent years (Hagedorn and Lester 2006). Earlier empirical studies comparing college readiness across ethnic groups also tended to find that Latinos ranked significantly below non-Latino whites in terms of standardized test scores (e.g., Perna 2000).

Additionally, a disproportionate portion of Latinos are found to need remediation in college (Vernez and Mizell 2001). There is a vast literature addressing the reasons for the racial gap in academic performance through secondary school, and distilling that literature is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is that

there appears to be little controversy that the ethnic gap in college persistence is in part a result of differences in average academic preparation entering college.

Conclusion 6: There is strong reason to believe that on average Latino students enter college with less “social capital” than at least non-Latino Caucasians, but it is less clear how this affects persistence toward a degree.

Interest in “social capital” has grown enormously in recent years, but the concept can be hard to pin down. In the educational context there seems to be consensus on a definition consistent with how the term was originally used by the prominent scholar James S. Coleman. That is, social capital is defined in terms of norms and social networks that assist in the transfer of education from one generation to the next (see especially Lopez 1996). Empirical research has investigated whether there are social capital differences across ethnic groups, and whether such differences might affect educational outcomes. While measurement strategies differ, such research often focuses on such considerations as extent of parent-student discussions about education and extent of parental participation in educational events.

The results appear to be somewhat ambiguous, at least with respect to college persistence. It seems well substantiated that higher social capital leads to greater educational achievement for adolescents, such as obtaining a high school degree and enrolling in college. There is also research indicating that on average social capital is lower for Latinos than non-Latino Caucasians (Lopez 1996; Perna and Titus 2005). However, it is not clear that social capital considerations affect retention for *students who make it as far as a college*

campus. Studies (e.g., Allen 1999) sometimes show that family support variables have little impact on persistence, although it is not apparent that all of these studies are measuring social capital per se.

Conclusion 7: We know little about the comparative impact of family considerations on the retention of Latinos and non-Latinos.

Family considerations emerge as a potentially important consideration in the research on Latino college students, and possible cultural differences in this regard might affect relative retention rates. Some research focusing exclusively on Latino college students suggests they may be uncommonly motivated to finish college because they “owed a debt” to their parents who often struggled hard to allow them to attend higher education (Hernandez 2000). But it is hard to be confident of any conclusions about differences between Latinos and non-Latinos because of the lack of comparative research. It is notable that in perhaps the most extensive review of the literature on Latino college retention, Hernandez and Lopez (2004, pp. 40-41) devote a section to family considerations.

However, they do not cite a single study that *compares* Latinos and non-Latinos with respect to the impact of family on college persistence.

*Conclusion 8: There is good reason to believe that perceptions of campus climate affect Latino persistence in higher education, but it is questionable whether campus climate variables affect Latinos **differently** than non-Latinos.*

A significant amount of research has been devoted at least in part to assessing the impact of campus climate on adjustment to college and persistence in higher education (e.g., Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales 2005; Hurtado and

Carter 1997; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005). Some have found that a racial climate perceived as hostile negatively affects a sense of belonging in college, even controlling for a number of other factors such as academic performance, and some have found that that this lowered sense of belonging in turn negatively affects persistence. The problem is that the vast majority of this work focuses only on Latinos or other minority groups. Absent comparisons across groups, it is impossible to determine whether or not negative aspects of campus climate might affect only minority students or *all* students. It is possible, for example, that faculty members perceived as cold and distant by minority students will also be perceived that way by white students. Furthermore, a climate perceived as “anti-minority” might be undesirable for white students.

Indeed, the limited comparative work casts doubt on the notion that campus climate *uniquely* affects minorities and may explain gaps in persistence rate (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn 1999; Eimers and Pike 1997; Nora and Cabrera 1996). These studies found that a climate perceived as hostile toward minorities had a negative impact on the persistence of *both* minority and non-minority students. While two of the above studies (Eimers and Pike 1997; Nora and Cabrera 1996) found that minority students were more likely to perceive a discriminatory racial climate and sense more prejudice than whites, one of these (Eimers and Pike 1997) found no differences in the corresponding effect on persistence. In that study, minority students were also more likely to report positive interactions with faculty and staff and more likely to express commitment to finishing their course of study than white students (Nora and

Cabrera 1996). An additional empirical study focusing mainly on choice of schools and secondarily on intention to reenroll after beginning college stressed the importance of feelings of belonging for both minority (including Latino) and non-minority students: “This study found that all students, regardless of their ethnicity, were more likely to reenroll if they felt accepted, safe, and happy at their colleges” (Nora 2004, 201).

IV. Implications for Policy and Further Research

Where does this review of the literature leave us with respect to both educational policy and what more needs to be learned? With respect to the former, the present study is broadly supportive of the comprehensive, multi-pronged approach detailed in the CSU Task Force report that is in turn grounded in the broader retention literature. **The key point is that we actually know quite a bit about how to retain Latino students because we know quite a bit about how to retain students more generally—and there is strong reason to think that the major factors operate similarly across ethnic groups.** Put another way, the empirical literature provides precious little support for the most far-reaching arguments that college persistence is strikingly different for Latino students. Accordingly, we should push ahead with recommendations regarding remediation, advising, creating a welcoming environment, etc. that were designed to help *all* college students at risk of dropping out. Note however that *implementation* of these policies might be at least partially differentiated across ethnic groups. Thus a carefully formulated welcoming policy (including such elements as freshman orientation) might include information that is sensitive to

cultural differences, emphasize key roles for people from different ethnic groups, and the like. Yet this still implies working within a common framework for enhancing retention.

But we also need to learn more about other topics. The present study suggests that we know much more about how the relatively low socio-economic status of average Latino college students affects college persistence than we do about other types of factors that might affect graduation rates. In particular, we need more comprehensive, comparative, cross-ethnic group studies of how family related cultural factors affect college retention. Both the extant retention literature, and previous research on how Latinos decide to attend college in the first place, contains interesting hints about how social capital and family attitudes might make it less or more likely that Latino students will obtain a degree, controlling for other factors. It is possible that college administrators could shape programs around these findings. Yet very little of this literature is comparative, so it is impossible to be confident in drawing inferences about the effect of cultural factors. We need to develop more studies of family and other related influence that include non-Latinos in the sample, even if non-Latinos primarily there to serve as a control group. Naturally, that also raises the issue of the heterogeneity of the Latino student population, which in turn suggests the desirability of disaggregating Latinos into different sub-populations (e.g., Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans).

Additionally, we are in need of more comparative research about the impact of campus climate on Latinos and non-Latinos. Again, while there is

some notable comparative work on campus climate, it largely subsumes Latinos in the larger category of minority students. To truly isolate the impact on Latinos, they must be considered as a separate group (or better still, the Latino student population itself might be further disaggregated). Researchers must also approach this topic with an open mind because some prior work suggests the need for skepticism regarding sweeping claims about the unique impact of campus climate on particular social groups.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of outside decision makers providing the financial support necessary to close the retention gap. Key players outside colleges and universities have sometimes been critical of academics for failing to graduate Latinos at a rate comparable to other students. Yet a careful review of the literature suggests that many of the factors responsible for the gap have their roots outside of academia, and will take additional resources to address. Latino college students disproportionately come from low socio-economic status families. On average they arrive on campus with less academic preparation, less social capital, and more fiscal challenges. As a result of all these factors, Latinos are also more likely to take the longer (and less certain) route to a college degree, attending community college before moving to a four year institution. These challenges are also more likely to make Latinos drop-out along the way, just as non-Latinos from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to persist to a BA degree.

The literature suggests that the problem can in part be overcome by greater financial aid to students. Yet the concern about the retention gap comes

on the heels of a long, well documented trend toward increased college tuition at public as well as private institutions and reduced financial aid, especially aid in the form of grants (Mortenson 2007; Mumper 2003). As a result, the cost of financing a higher education over and above the amount of financial aid available is growing for low-income students in the United States (Mortensen 2007).

Scholars often frame the issue in terms of *access* to higher education. Thus for example, Michael Mumper titles his comprehensive review (2003) of trends in financing of college education: “The Future of College Access: The Declining Role of Public Higher Education in Promoting Equal Opportunity.” **Yet review of the persistence literature suggests the problem goes well beyond access.**

If we want to *retain* more of those Latino students who make it to college, and especially if we want to close the gap in terms of the likelihood Latinos will finish, we must make a greater financial commitment than we are offering at the moment.

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