COMMENTARY

To Close the Bachelor's Degree Gap Among Hispanic Youth, Policymakers Must Consider How Parent Networks Matter

AUTHORS

Robert K. Ream | University of California, Riverside

Sarah Ryan | Education Development Center

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Improving bachelor's degree attainment among Hispanic individuals should be at the top of the policy agenda in California, where nearly 40 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino.

At a time when a postsecondary education has never been more important to both individual mobility and California's economic prosperity, only 12% of the state's Hispanic population between the ages of 25 and 64 holds a bachelor's degree This stands in stark contrast to four-year degree attainment among California's White population (42%).

Not beginning college at a four-year institution constitutes one key obstacle to equitable rates of bachelor's degree attainment among Hispanic students relative to other racial/ethnic groups. California is more reliant on its community colleges as a point of entry to postsecondary education than almost any other state. While the state's community colleges constitute an essential element within its higher education system, it remains the case that less than half of students who enter a community college intending to transfer eventually do so.

Without a change in course, California is currently on a trajectory that will leave the state1.1 million bachelor's degrees short of economic demand by 2030. Closing California's degree gap cannot be achieved without significantly increasing college attainment among Hispanic individuals, who make up the state's largest racial/ethnic group. Our research suggests that policy solutions will require attending to the diverse needs and assets within the Hispanic population, including needs and assets that vary with immigrant generation status. In California, baccalaureate degree attainment differs significantly between native- (18%) and foreign-born (7%) individuals.

Using data from the NCES Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, a nationally representative longitudinal dataset, we examined the process of four-year college enrollment across three immigrant generations of Hispanic adolescents. In our study, "Variation Across Hispanic Immigrant Generations in Parent Social Capital, College-Aligned Actions, and Four-Year College Enrollment" we focus on how parents' relationships—with their children, with parents of their children's friends and with school staff—influence students' college preparation and enrollment decisions.

We found that Hispanic parents access social networks on behalf of their students, but in ways that vary depending on children's immigrant generation.

- Intergenerational closure (i.e., the extent to which parents are connected to the parents of their children's friends) was linked to four-year enrollment uniquely among first-generation youth.
- Similarly, it was specifically among third and later generations that parents' more formal relationships with school personnel appeared to promote their children's four-year college enrollment.
    - The benefits of school-based social capital operated largely by helping parents support their children's engagement in college-aligned actions, which refer to a set of key steps that students must take during high school in order to align their college preparation with enrollment in a four-year college or university.

College-aligned actions are one potential mechanism through which parents' social and other resources influence children's four-year college enrollment. College-aligned actions include preparing academically for college entry, completing entrance exams, and submitting an application to at least one four-year institution.

Hispanic students who engaged in highly college-aligned actions during high school had a significantly greater probability of beginning college at a four-year institution. Importantly, engaging in college-aligned actions was similarly beneficial regardless of immigrant generation. Hispanic students more than one standard deviation above the average level of engagement in college-aligned actions were especially likely to pursue college preparatory course work and to submit applications to more than one four-year institution, relative to students whose level of college-aligned actions fell between the mean and one standard deviation above the mean.

Supplying the California economy with an adequate number of employees holding a bachelor's degree cannot be accomplished without boosting four-year college enrollment and completion among the state's Hispanic population. Policy solutions must include parents of Hispanic youth as essential partners in working to close California's workforce skills gap—particularly in the context of California's new K–12 school financing formula (Local Control Funding Formula), which will require policymakers to engage parents and communities. Moreover, strategies with the potential to close this gap must be informed by the unique needs and assets of Hispanic parents according to immigrant generation and other factors that mark the diversity within this influential and growing constituency. This should include strategies that recognize the nuanced ways in which Hispanic parents use their social networks to support their children's college preparation and enrollment.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

