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The stratification of college-going Latinos' postsecondary destinations



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1. Introduction

Educational attainment appears to be improving for Latino students in the United States, but Latinos remain stratified in terms of their postsecondary destinations. Researchers and policy makers have recently marked a number of milestones that suggest progress for Latinos. High school dropout rates have fallen steadily for Latinos over the last ten years (Fry and Taylor, 2013) and Latino college enrollment rates have increased dramatically in that same period of time, outpacing the growth of both white and black students (Fry, 2011). These trends represent important advances for Latinos, the largest and fastest-growing minority group in the United States; however, they also mask lingering inequalities in Latinos' educational trajectories compared to students of other races/ethnicities. Latinos disproportionately attend two-year colleges over four-year colleges, and, on average, those Latino students who attend four-year colleges enroll in less selective four-year schools than their white peers (Fry and Taylor, 2013).

The overall aim of this study is to investigate why Latinos are stratified in terms of their postsecondary destinations. Current research suggests that Latinos' low socioeconomic status (SES) and low academic performance serve as the two primary reasons for Latinos' disproportionate enrollment in community college (Cabrera et al., 2005; Kurlaender, 2006; Ovink and Kalogrides, 2015). In this study, we build on the research that suggests the importance of both structural barriers related to socioeconomic status and individual academic performance for Latinos. We investigate the effects of family socioeconomic status, financial aid and planning, and academic performance on the stratification of Latinos' postsecondary destinations compared to whites. With the majority of Latino high school graduates now attending postsecondary institutions, we also recognize that stratification within higher education is an important consideration. As others have found, we find that college-going Latinos disproportionately enroll in two-year colleges instead of four-year institutions. However, four-year

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institutions vary in their selectivity and we also consider whether Latinos are less likely to enroll in selective postsecondary institutions compared to whites. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: First, do sociodemographic characteristics, academic performance, and financial aid and planning mediate the Latino/white gap in college destinations? Second, do Latinos receive lower postsecondary enrollment returns on family background and academic achievement compared to whites? The answers to these questions shed light on the extent to which Latino students' postsecondary destinations are a function of the structure of their socioeconomic circumstances or their academic agency to perform well in school and plan for college.

We build on current research and make four distinct contributions to knowledge about the stratification of Latino postsecondary destinations. First, we expand measures of socioeconomic status and academic performance used in previous research to include financial aid and planning for college as well as students' test performance and high school coursework. Our study contributes to research on Latinos specifically by using both expanded measures of socioeconomic status and academic performance in the same model, which are the two factors posed as major explanations of Latinos' disadvantage in previous research. Second, in an increasingly competitive postsecondary arena, college selectivity is an important dimension of stratification by race/ethnicity (Alon and Tienda, 2007; Posselt et al., 2012). We analyze how the important potential mechanisms of financial aid and academic performance contribute to Latinos' postsecondary enrollment, particularly in selective colleges, where enrollment may depend heavily on these factors. It is vital to investigate how Latinos fare in terms of selective college enrollment compared to other racial/ethnic groups. Third, our study concentrates specifically on the transition to college by focusing on college-going students only. This narrower focus allows us to delve deeper into the factors that potentially drive stratification of college destinations. Overall, our study adds nuance to examinations of the lingering inequalities in Latino postsecondary educational trajectories.

There is reason to suggest that Latino students may have distinctive patterns in their transition to college compared to other racial/ethnic groups, and these patterns may be related to sociodemographic characteristics of the population, school segregation, and lower levels of social capital related to college-going (Crosnoe, 2006; Kurlaender, 2006; Perez and McDonough, 2008; Reardon and Owens, 2014). Latinos are transitioning to college during a time of postsecondary expansion (Baum et al., 2013), which has arguably increased social stratification at the postsecondary level along racial/ethnic lines (Alon and Tienda, 2007). At the same time, universities, especially more selective universities, are becoming increasingly tenacious in terms of their recruitment of racial/ethnic minority students through pre-college outreach programs and offerings of financial aid (Swail and Perna, 2002) and have a documented preference for higher performing Latino and black candidates (Grodsky, 2007).

However, it may be that Latinos, like blacks, have overall differential returns to advantageous demographic and academic statuses such as higher parents' level of education and higher academic achievement. As other researchers have done when investigating intergenerational mobility for blacks (Bennett and Xie, 2003; Davis and Welcher, 2013; Long et al., 2012), we argue that higher levels of parental education may not necessarily transmit advantages to children that culminate in higher educational attainment (and subsequent occupational mobility). For example, black students with high levels of parental education experience diminished returns with regard to postsecondary enrollment and attainment compared to white and Asian students (Long et al., 2012). We extend this research by investigating differential returns to parents' level of education and academic achievement for Latino students and considering whether relatively advantaged Latinos are still being filtered into community colleges and less selective four-year institutions. This is our fourth contribution to current research.

2. Background

2.1. Stratification of postsecondary destinations for college-going Latinos

Recent college enrollment trends suggest persistent qualitative differences for how Latino students attend college compared with students of other races and ethnicities, and these divergences have important consequences for Latino educational attainment. Latino students apply to and attend college at similar rates as students of other races and ethnicities, but disadvantages emerge in the level and selectivity of their college destinations. Most notably, Latino students disproportionately enroll in two-year colleges and in less selective four-year colleges after high school (Fry, 2011; Fry and Taylor, 2013).

This stratification in postsecondary destinations has important consequences for Latino students' success in college. Attending either a two-year college or a non-selective four-year college is associated with lower rates of college completion, particularly for minority or disadvantaged students (Cabrera et al., 2005; Crisp and Nora, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2010). While Latinos had completely closed college enrollment gaps with white students by 2011, Latino students who entered college that same year were only half as likely as white students to obtain a four-year degree (Fry, 2011). As more high school graduates enroll in college, competition to gain entrance into selective colleges has increased (Weis et al., 2014), with ever more stringent requirements for admission into selective universities (Stevens, 2007). Research suggests that students who attend selective colleges are advantaged in their postsecondary outcomes among college attendees; more selective colleges produce higher graduation rates and better occupational outcomes (Hoekstra, 2009; Hout, 2012; Long, 2010). In addition, students who attend more selective universities have higher occupational status both immediately upon graduation as well as later in graduates' careers (Brand and Xie, 2010).

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