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Living in Limbo: A Study of the Education Needs of (Un)Documented Hispanic Adults

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Abstract: *This paper presents research that investigated the educational needs of (un)documented Hispanic adults enrolled in two-year colleges. The research found that study participants face significant risks and barriers to meaningful participation in two-year colleges.*

Background & Study Purpose

With a population of 35 million that has grown 58% over the past decade, Hispanics have surpassed the Black population as the largest minority group in the U.S. (US Census Bureau, 2000). Hispanics, however, still lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in educational achievement. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report, only 40% of Hispanic adults 17 years old and over participate in adult education in the US. The NCES (2003) report also found that Hispanic adults were less likely than Whites, Blacks, and Asians/Pacific Islanders to have enrolled in career or job-related courses. Additionally, Hispanic students have higher high school dropout rates (28%) than White (7%) or Black (13%) students and young adults who do not finish high school are more likely to be unemployed and earn less (NCES, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the educational needs and concerns of the Hispanic adults enrolled in technical and community colleges in the Southeastern region of the US. The research provides important knowledge for college administrators on risks and barriers undocumented Hispanics experience daily.

Conceptual Framework

In terms of supporting many adult Hispanics' desire for greater educational access, achievement and upward mobility, the social and economic case for expanding current community and technical college opportunities is not hard to make. Given that many adult Hispanics pursue GED, ESOL and literacy education, and make up much of the service industry occupations (NCES, 2003)**,** community and technical colleges provide adult immigrants, often with limited English proficiency, a useful and accessible educational point of entry. However, the rapidly growing Hispanic adult population in the Southeastern region of the U.S. presents challenges for many community and technical colleges in this area who are ill-equipped for addressing the unique educational needs of adult Hispanics (Atiles & Bohan, 2002). While research has focused on social integration, achievement, and economic factors affecting immigrants at community and technical colleges, there are very few empirical studies that shed light on the educational needs and concerns of undocumented Hispanic adults that might help two-year college administrators' more effectively address challenges undocumented Hispanics and other immigrants face on a daily basis (Alfred, 2002; Lee, 2002; Sparks, 2002).

Research Methods

A qualitative research design was used to better understand the educational needs and concerns of Hispanic adults related to participation in 2-yr college education. Thirteen Hispanic adults participated in 4 focus groups. Eleven study participants were Hispanic students currently enrolled in programs at technical and two- year colleges, and nine out of eleven had obtained a high school degree and GED in the US. Eight of the Hispanics were without documentation, and had affiliation with five different countries including Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Two others were not currently enrolled, but were interested in pursuing a two-year college degree and had inquired about admissions requirements, and programs. A constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1973) was used to identify emergent categories associated with information gleaned from data gathered from focus groups (Patton 2002).

Findings & Implications

An analysis of research data found that the Hispanic adults' needs and concerns fell into three broad categories that were seen as barriers to participation in 2-yr college education: 1) language and access, 2) knowledge and cultural misperceptions, 3) legal status, residency and financial issues. Each category is a crucial link to either enhancing or hindering Hispanics participation to 2-yr college programs. The research points to the need for greater advocacy efforts for institutional policies and state level legislation that specifically addresses educational access and barriers affecting undocumented immigrants whose struggles remain largely invisible in the eyes of many educators and policymakers. The results of this research offer greater visibility to the educational challenges that undocumented Hispanic contend with, and also provide hope and practical recourse for many of the participants who continue to "live in limbo," often without "official" access to education, meaningful voice and political representation.

Language and Access

Not surprisingly, each of the participants mentioned language needs as having significant impact on their ability to understand and participate meaningfully in technical college programs. More significantly, a number of the participants felt that limited English skills put many Hispanics in a double-bind. On the one hand, current Hispanic students often do not have the required level of English proficiency to perform well in college-level and other workforce development programs and coursework. On the other, they tend to miss out on participating in technical education programs altogether because their low level of English prevents them from gaining access to information and knowledge about the purpose and value of technical college programs. For example, in one of our focus groups, Luisa and Manual, two highly motivated adults who are originally from El Salvador, expressed an interest in getting a technical college degree to gain more meaningful employment and become more economically stable. They have two children, work full-time, and have limited proficiency in English. Luisa was the former director of nursing in a hospital in El Salvador, but since moving to the U.S., she is currently working in a poultry plant. Manual has a 2-year degree in agronomy and works as a landscaper making half the salary of others in similar positions with U.S. college degrees. Luisa initially sought information on how she might fit in at a technical college and embarked on a fact-finding process at a local technical college. However, she was intimidated by the complexity of the information she was presented with in English. She could not locate Spanish speaking staff and could not find Spanish language application materials. While the college representative who she met with was extremely thoughtful and well-intentioned, the information provided in English was extensive and confusing particularly around the application process and her unique legal status even when translated from English to Spanish. Luisa was visibly frustrated her attempts to learn about technical education opportunities in order to improve her employment situation. She feels like she lives in limbo working at a low wage job unrelated to her educational experience and professional background and well below her potential. During another focus group, a Spanish-speaking study participant from Puerto Rico, who worked for the Labor Department, confirmed what many Hispanics like Luisa confront each day,

> I found out very quickly moving here…that there were people from various places that had degrees that were doctors in their countries and then they come here simply because they couldn't speak the language. The first thing that they were given was a referral to go to a job at the poultry plant and that just blew my mind because working for the Department of Labor I thought, my God, these are people who in their countries are doctors and lawyers…but they are forced to go work at a poultry plant simply because they couldn't learn the language…

Knowledge and Cultural Misperceptions

The most frequent comment was that many Hispanics who come to the U.S. do not understand the system of higher education in the U.S. and rarely make distinctions between the central mission and purpose of two- and four-year colleges, and the types and value of degrees, diplomas, and certifications offered. There was a consensus among them that most of the miscommunication centered on the inability to gain clear information on admissions requirements, the application process, legal status, residency, tuition, degree and other programs, credit hours, and financial aid. One Hispanic student explains that non-participation in education has to do with Hispanics level of education and resources upon arrival to the U.S., “Unfortunately, the Hispanic people who come to live in this country are those with fewer resources with low levels of education…they probably went no further than secondary school…so you [two-year educators] need to look for ways to give them information so that it is compatible with their ways of understanding it.” Moreover, a college education wasn’t viewed as the most logical and practical way to get a job or further enhance employment opportunities. We found that many Hispanics are much “more motivated to find a job and make money rather than complete high school.”

The majority of the Hispanic students in our focus groups mentioned that they are the first in their family not only to attend college, but to have finished high school. Maria comments were typical among the Hispanic students in our focus groups, “I am the only one in my family who is in school, who finished school - high school. I have felt privileged since I finished high school because in Mexico you do not have the opportunity to attend high school for free, so when I finished high school I said well I also have the opportunity to attend the university, to continue, and so here I am.” Each of the students mentioned that many lower-income Hispanics in the U.S. hold the cultural misconception that postsecondary education is not an option for them and countering such false perceptions is “the biggest battle to overcome.” Pursuing a college education, therefore, is not often nurtured by parents who often arrive to the U.S. with low literacy and income levels. Two- and four-year colleges are lumped together and often seen as unattainable, for the elite, and/or based on merit – meaning advanced levels of English proficiency and high standardized test scores.

We also found that throughout the high school and college system, teachers, counselors, and professional staff give a number of mixed messages to undocumented Hispanics who wanted to pursue a 2-year degree. For example, Teresa describes Hispanics’ frustration with the lack of encouragement from guidance counselors who don’t understand that undocumented Hispanic high school students’ cannot be denied access to college without a social security card, “I went to my counselor and I told her, I found this about the [foundation] grant…Instead of her informing me, I took it to her and I told her I want to apply and she said ‘no you can't because you don't have a Social Security.’ I said, “I am only asking you to do me the favor to speak to them” and she says ‘no because you don't have a Social Security’ and she scolded me and made me leave the office. Three days later she apologized, but I got the scholarship.”

The notion of “open admissions” is also a foreign concept. The lack of understanding about college admissions policies and requirements for undocumented individuals can have detrimental and in some cases a devastating impact on Hispanics whose dream since childhood has been to go to college. Eva highlights the negative effects of common misunderstandings around the need for a social security card to be admitted to college, **“**For me the biggest [barrier] is that they told me I could not go to college. That killed me. I came to the house crying, Mama they won't let me register. Only if I marry a citizen. A month ago they told me that. Sally [the counselor] came to speak with us about college and said that we could not enter without Social Security.”

The majority of Hispanic students we spoke with feel a moral obligation to go to Hispanic communities, churches, and high schools and give presentations about the importance of graduating from high school, the kind of college degrees that exist, the admission requirements, and the process for applying to college. They break down the cultural myths and address legitimate fears and concerns in the Hispanic communities they visit around the need for a “social.” Eva and Maria discuss recent visits with children and parents at a public housing complex to discuss their experience in college with Hispanic parents. Maria explains the parents’ typical dilemma “many parents are saying, ‘Yes I want my child to go to college but he does not have a Social Security,’ Eva adds, “All the papas cry ‘Social Security, Social Security, we can work and pay the tuition but they won't accept them because they don't have Social Security.’

Legal and Residency Status

Perhaps the most striking finding in this study has to do with issues related to Hispanics’ legal and residency status and intimately connected to that, the challenges associated with the cost of tuition and lack of state and federal types of financial aid for undocumented Hispanic students. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (January, 2003), there are an estimated 7 million undocumented persons living in the U.S. Since many Hispanics do not have documentation or are not considered “residents” despite having graduated from a local U.S. high school, their legal and residency status has a significant impact on their ability to pay tuition, receive financial aid, drive to school, and indeed, interact with school “officials” who are often viewed with suspicion lest too much attention be paid to their legal status. Further, when we met with each of the Hispanic students, we were surprised at how many of them were without legal documentation and the extent to which their legal status causes psychological stress.

In one of our focus groups with four female Hispanic students, the diversity of “legal status” and the challenges and risks associated with legal status became immediately and poignantly apparent. Three of the student participants had come to the U.S. with their parents at a relatively young age and had graduated from high school in the US. Despite their current full-time and “privileged” educational status, as the Hispanic women in this focus group tend refer to it, each of them continues to experience daily frustrations around what they consider to be a “dual student status.” On the surface, each student does what most adult students do: study, work, interact with other students and faculty, and attend school-sponsored clubs and activities. However, underneath the surface, each woman described contending with myriad social, financial, and institutional barriers constructed around the invisible, unauthorized side of their student (and personal) life. All of them mention daily obstacles undocumented Hispanic students face each day including, having to “pay tuition rates that are four times the rate for students” and “driving to school each day without a driver’s license.” One of the women, the President of the Latino Association on campus, described the letdown that undocumented Hispanic high school graduates face when they find out that they do not have the same right to attend college as their American and legal Hispanic friends, “The biggest barrier is that once you inform the students that they have to go to college [in high school] and they want to go, but they can't. Because most of the Hispanics who live here…don't have the necessary ‘resources’ to enter into the university.” Eva adds that another dilemma facing current undocumented Hispanic students is that once in a degree program there is no guarantee that you’ll get a job upon completion of your degree, “because even if someone graduates, if you don't have a work permit, a green card, you can't have your career. To know that if you invest all of those years you will not be able to exercise your career. It's discouraging. I say that this is the biggest barrier that exists for the Hispanics. What do you do afterward?”

The ambivalence that study participants express about the contradiction of admitting an Hispanic student to college, while at the same time knowing that without legal documentation a job is not on the horizon, was a tenuous thread that ran through this study and one that causes great debate among students and among administrators. The majority of the study participants agreed, however, in the need for legislation such as the DREAM act that will permit undocumented students to obtain permanent residency status who have been here for over five years and have graduated from high school and/or obtained a GED. However, what to do in the in the meantime is a sticking point. For example, Linda who recently spent a day in jail for not having a valid driver’s license, shrugs off her daily risks and argues that students without a “social” should still concentrate on getting an education because of the long-term social and economic benefits even if they cannot be immediately realized in the workplace, “…studying isn't just about money, it is about changing your social level. Changing your social level you will help the lower levels. From there, no one can take it away from you. Even without papers you will have a different social level and a different way of looking at things.”

All the Hispanic students agreed however, that while money is an important consideration, there are also a number of Hispanic parents and adults who will make significant sacrifices for their children and for their own careers to receive an education. Maria makes this point clear, “I speak with them in church, what they tell me is ‘what I want is that my child study, it doesn't matter to me if I have to work overtime. I don't want my child to end up in a chicken processing plant.’”

The stark reality is that at four times the rate of in-state resident tuition, many Hispanic adults cannot fund their education. All of the study participants were frustrated by this legal and financial predicament and the need to use innovative, albeit primarily short-term, stop-gap measures that in the end do not address a more significant underlying problem, that is, the dramatic increase of undocumented and/or “mixed-status” Hispanics who are prevented from fully participating in higher education programs and from gaining meaningful employment without a “social.”

Conclusion

Overall, Hispanic adults in this study were “living in limbo” - a state of constant fear without legal documentation and social security card, taking a number of risks daily, including living without medical and car insurance and driving to school without a valid license. Most of these daily risks stem from their unauthorized status in the U.S. Therefore, the ubiquitous quest of foreign-born and undocumented Hispanics for legal status and the “social” is literally the *key* to participating in just about everything in the US – driving a car, gaining employment benefits, insurance coverage, and importantly, for this study, a more easily accessible and affordable door to education.

Adult educators, in particular, should care even more about the predicaments of border-crossers and Hispanic immigrants “particularly since 30% of those [immigrants] full-time employees don’t have high school diplomas” and because “51% of immigrants from Latin America and 63% from Central America do not have a high school diploma while 21% from Latin America and 23% from Central America are living below the poverty line” (Alfred, 2002, p. 5). These are staggering statistics and only underscore the importance for advocate for the passage of federal legislation such as the DREAM or SOLVE Acts to support undocumented immigrants who have graduated from a local high school, gain permanent residency status and enjoy the benefits and opportunities afforded permanent residents in their desire to obtain an education and social mobility.

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