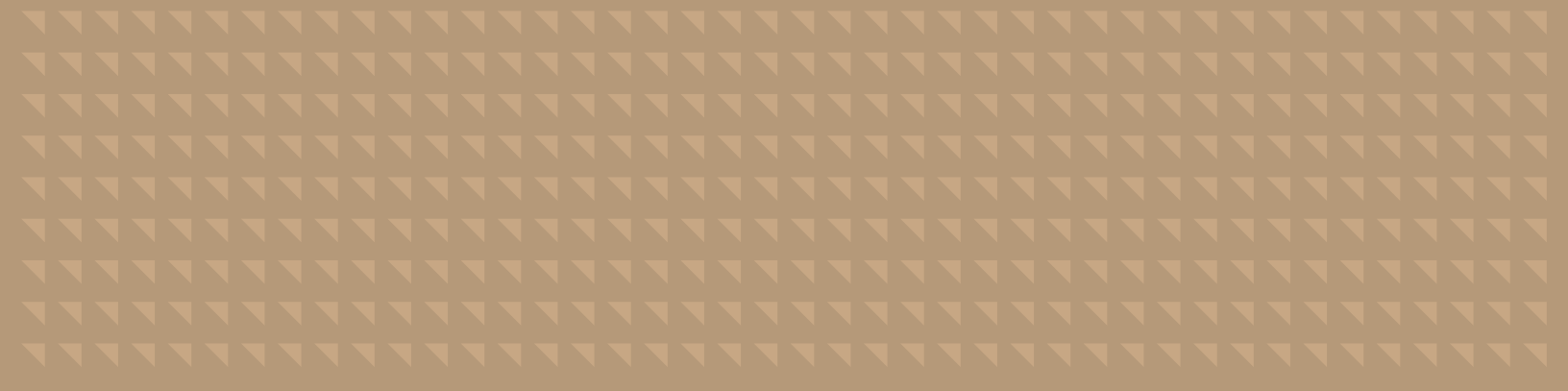


Paths to the Baccalaureate



A Study of Transfer and Native Students
at a Hispanic Serving Institution



Brent D. Cejda, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Educational Leadership & Higher Education
College of Education and Human Sciences
University of Nebraska—Lincoln
Box 880360
Lincoln, NE 68588-0360
Phone: 402-472-0989
Fax: 402-472-4300
E-mail: bcejda2@unl.edu

Sheldon L. Stick, Ph.D.

Professor, Educational Leadership & Higher Education
College of Education and Human Sciences
University of Nebraska—Lincoln
sstick1@unl.edu

Funding for this project was provided by The TG Public Benefit Grant Program.
Information on this program can be found at <http://www.tgslc.org/publicbenefit/index.cfm>

Table of Contents

Literature Review	3
Conceptual Framework	4
Method	5
Research Design	5
Setting	5
Participants	6
Procedures	6
Analysis	7
Paths to the Baccalaureate Beginning at a Community College	8
Community college career path	8
Community college heating up path	9
Community college traditional path	10
Community college dual enrollment path	10
Paths to the Baccalaureate Beginning at a Four-Year Institution	11
Four-year traditional path	11
Four-year reverse transfer path	12
Four-year multiple path	13
Four-year dual 4-year path	13
Navigating the Path to the Baccalaureate	14
Approaching the path	14
Following the path	15
Reaching the destination	16
The Community College as a Path to the Baccalaureate	16
Conclusions	17
Recommendations	18

Paths to the Baccalaureate: A Study of Transfer and Native Students at a Hispanic Serving Institution

by Brent D. Cejda and Sheldon L. Stick

Abstract

Hispanic participation in postsecondary education has more than doubled during the past 20 years. This increased participation, however, has not resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Hispanics who complete a bachelor's degree. Typically, enrollment patterns in higher education have been designated solely from the starting point—beginning at a community college or beginning at a four-year college or university. This paper examines the paths followed by Hispanic baccalaureate completers at a nonselective, public university. The purpose of the study is to describe the paths in more detail and to provide insight into the experiences of those who have realized this educational goal.

The community college has been described as the pipeline for Hispanics in higher education (Rendon & Nora, 1989; Laden, 1992, 2001). In Fall 2001, 59% of Hispanic enrollment in higher education was at community colleges (Harvey & Anderson, 2005) and few would argue that the community college has not significantly contributed to increased Hispanic participation. Several reports, however, stress that while participation rates have increased, there are continued disparities in baccalaureate outcomes between Hispanic and Caucasian college students (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003; Council of Economic Advisers, 2000; Fry, 2002; Vernez, & Mizell, 2001). With the majority of Hispanic enrollment in community colleges, particular concern has been raised regarding the limited numbers of Hispanic students who successfully transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions and complete the baccalaureate degree.

Among the Hispanic students in the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study who attended a community college, slightly less than 25% indicated the intent to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree. Six years after enrolling in community colleges, 6% had been awarded the baccalaureate (Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Fry (2004) found that, among those who entered the community college as "minimally qualified" for postsecondary education, 16% of Caucasians completed a bachelor's degree compared to only 7% of Hispanics. Swail, Cabrera, and Lee (2004) found a baccalaureate completion ratio of almost 2:1 between Caucasians and Hispanics who entered higher education at a community college.



There are also significant differences in bachelor's degree completion rates between Hispanic and Caucasian students who enter postsecondary education at a four-year college or university. Two recent studies have found a 23% difference in the baccalaureate completion rates of "qualified" Caucasian and Hispanic students enrolled in non-selective four year institutions (Fry, 2004; Swail, Cabrera, and Lee, 2004). Using the same database, Arbona and Nora (2007) reported that 44% of all Hispanic students that first attended a four-year institution in 1992 had completed a bachelor's degree eight years later. As the title of a report about Latinos in higher education indicates, "many enroll, too few graduate" (Fry, 2002).

Literature Review

The literature on the reasons for the disparity in baccalaureate completion between Hispanics and Caucasians is fairly limited. The National Center for Education Statistics has identified seven characteristics that negatively impact baccalaureate completion (NCES, 2002). These include delayed postsecondary enrollment, part-time enrollment, not having a regular high school diploma, working full-time, being financially independent, having children or dependents, and being a single parent. Although these characteristics are applicable to all postsecondary students, Fry (2003) stressed that Hispanic undergraduates are more likely to experience these risk factors.

In their examination of Hispanic college attendance and degree attainment, Swail, Cabrera, and Lee (2004) identified two different categories of characteristics that may contribute to the lower percentages of Hispanic degree completion. The first category includes characteristics concerning high school where their analysis revealed that Hispanics were more likely to have been retained at a grade level for an additional year, attended more than two high schools, completed lower level mathematics courses, earned a grade of C or lower in at least one course, or to have dropped out. They also found that Hispanics were more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to have earned a GED rather than a high school diploma. The second category includes family and personal characteristics such as limited English proficiency, parents who did not graduate from high school or have no postsecondary experience, having a sibling who dropped out, becoming a parent during high school, and lower socio-economic status.

In a recent study comparing Hispanic degree attainment between students who initially enrolled in a two- or four-year institution, Arbona and Nora (2007) found two factors that significantly increased the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor's degree regardless of the initial

institutional type; enrollment in postsecondary education immediately after high school and continuous enrollment while attending college. In terms of Hispanic students who began at community colleges, gender and three pre-college factors also significantly increased the probability of completing a bachelor's degree. Women were 33% more likely than men to attain a bachelor's degree. The expectation of earning a college degree during the 10th grade and completing a rigorous high school curriculum increased the probability of Hispanics who initially enrolled in a community college by 93% and 59% respectively. In terms of Hispanic students who began at four-year colleges or universities, two pre-college factors and three college behaviors also significantly increased the probability of completing a bachelor's degree. If in the 10th grade your parents expected that you would attend college and earn a degree, you were 33% more likely to complete a degree than if the expectations were that you would not attend or not complete the degree. In addition, if at least some of your friends planned to attend college, you were 40% more likely to finish a bachelor's degree than if few or none of your friends indicated that college was in their future. Full-time enrollment, completing a large proportion of classes attempted, and first year academic performance increased the chances of graduation by 50%, 55%, and 24%, respectively.

What is lacking in the literature are studies focused on developing an understanding of the experiences of Hispanics who have navigated the path to the baccalaureate degree. Beyond the type of postsecondary institution they initially enroll in, are there recurring patterns that can describe their paths to the baccalaureate? What processes and meanings do they attach to the challenges and barriers they faced in pursuing postsecondary education and in completing a bachelor's degree? What meaning and perspective can they provide to improve efforts to increase baccalaureate completion among Hispanics and to guide those who follow?

Conceptual Framework

Path dependence was originally an economic theory but has become a popular phrase, used in a broad fashion to mean that history matters (Pierson, 2004). This wider use of the term has been criticized as trivial (Page, 2006). Heller (2006), however, points out that path dependence has been useful in examining and understanding non-optimal outcomes. We view the low percentage of Hispanic baccalaureate attainment as a non-optimal outcome and, thus, path dependence as an appropriate conceptual framework.

Moreover, a number of studies have found that history does matter. As the American higher education system has operated, an overwhelming percentage of Hispanic students have enrolled in community colleges and non-selective four-year institutions and their baccalaureate completion rates lag significantly behind other racial and ethnic groups (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Fry, 2002, 2004; Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). The incorporation of a path dependency framework serves three purposes. First, it enables the formulation of more comprehensive paths. We hypothesize that the experiences of Hispanics who have completed the baccalaureate can be described in greater detail than simply by the

type of institution where they began postsecondary study. Second, even the critics of path dependency agree that different histories happen. Path dependency helps explain how and why some Hispanic college students complete a bachelor's degree and others do not.

More importantly, it would seem that there are two options to improving the baccalaureate completion rates of Hispanics. Fry (2004) stresses the importance of dramatically increasing the numbers of Hispanics who attend more selective institutions of higher education as the means to increase baccalaureate attainment rates. A second option would be to learn from the experiences of others and attempt to increase the success rates along the paths that are, and for many reasons, may remain most common. Our conceptual framework focuses on the words of George Santayana, a Hispanic philosopher, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it".

Method

Research Design

Our interest in this study was to gain insight into the experiences of Hispanic men and women who had earned a bachelor's degree. To examine the experiences of these individuals, we employed a phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2002). This approach focuses on a phenomena (completing a baccalaureate degree) with the analysis based on the perspective of the individual (the Hispanic student) experiencing the phenomenon.

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences leading to the baccalaureate degree that emerged from the perspectives of two groups of Hispanic students, those that began postsecondary education at a community college and those that began postsecondary education at a four-year college or university. To accomplish this purpose we conducted a series of face-to-face interviews, the primary method of data collection used in the phenomenological framework (Merriam, 2002). Originally we considered guided conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), an interview process that would allow the participants to talk freely about their experiences in pursuing and completing a bachelor's degree. We settled on a semi-structured interview protocol (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) to ensure that we gathered the same information from each participant.

Setting

We gathered data in the fall of 2006 at a nonselective, public Hispanic-serving university in the Southwestern United States (SWU). In the fall of 2005, the institution had an unduplicated headcount of 14,450 undergraduates. Hispanic enrollment at the institution was 90% of the total student body and 60% of the students were women. The vast majority of SWU students are from low socio-economic backgrounds, with 80% of the full-time, first-time undergraduate students receiving federal grants in 2004-05.

Participants

A total of 63 individuals, 27 males and 36 females, participated in our study. Each of these individuals identified themselves as Hispanic and completed a baccalaureate degree after May 2003 or was scheduled to graduate in December 2006 (one week after the interviews were conducted). Within this group, 26 individuals began postsecondary education at a community college and 37 began postsecondary education at a four-year college or university. Thirty-four members of the sample were 24 years of age or younger and twenty-nine were 25 years of age or older.

Procedures

We gained access to participants through the Office of the Registrar (the Office) at SWU. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the Office identified potential participants through purposeful sampling, based on the criteria of Hispanic designation and baccalaureate completion after May 2003, or scheduled graduation in December 2006. Potential participants were sent a letter from the registrar, explaining the study and inviting their participation in face-to-face interviews with the two researchers. The Office also collected the RSVPs and scheduled the interviews.

We traveled to SWU late in the fall of 2006, spending five days on the campus to conduct the face-to-face interviews. Data was collected in semi-private locations on the campus, through interviews that lasted approximately one hour in length. We obtained two separate permissions from the participants, to conduct the interview and to audio record the interview.

After conducting three interviews each, we met briefly to discuss the interview process. We periodically checked with each other each day and also met briefly in the evenings to monitor the progress of completing the interviews. No changes were made to the interview protocol as a result of these meetings.

The interviews were guided by four broad questions:

1. What path did you follow to complete the baccalaureate degree?
2. Who has influenced or helped you along this path?
3. What challenges/issues/barriers have you experienced?
4. How did you overcome these challenges/issues/barriers?

Probing questions identified:

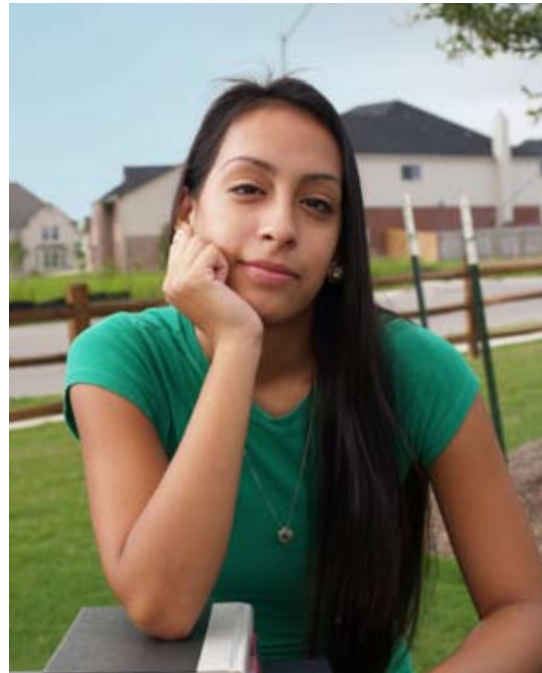
- whether the person started postsecondary education immediately after completing high school
- the type, number, and sequence of institution(s) attended
- enrollment patterns (full- or part-time)
- employment patterns (full- or part-time)

At the completion of each interview, we summarized our interpretation of the primary points in the answers to each question (a form of member checking). We also asked each participant to make suggestions for improving the baccalaureate completion rate of Hispanics.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and data analysis occurred in two stages. In the first stage we incorporated a modified analytic induction model (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) to identify the various paths to the baccalaureate. The purpose of this model is to develop descriptions that include all of the instances of the phenomenon, in this case the paths of all 63 participants in the study. We began this stage with the broad categorizations of two paths, one starting at a community college and the other beginning at a four-year college or university. We each selected ten interviews that we had conducted, examining the data for greater clarification to the two broad classifications, and then presented our findings to each other. As a final step to the model we examined each other's interviews and compared the analyses for discrepancies. When no major discrepancies emerged, we continued to follow the model and the process described above for the remainder of the interviews.

In the second stage of data analysis, we reviewed the notes, summaries of the main points, and transcripts of the interviews through an interpretative approach (Berg, 2004) attempting to capture the essence of the participants' descriptions of the challenges/issues/barriers they faced, how they overcame the challenges/issues/barriers, and their suggestions for improving the baccalaureate completion rate of Hispanics. In our search for the telos of these accounts we drew on the available literature on Hispanic college attendance and degree attainment. We conducted successive reviews of the materials independently, making notes and suggesting themes. Once we had completed our individual analyses, we compared notes and suggested themes for additional analysis to present a more comprehensive explanation of the lived experiences of the participants than would have been achieved by the condensing of data by sorting or coding discreet words or phrases.



Paths to the Baccalaureate Beginning at a Community College

Among the group of baccalaureate completers who began postsecondary education at a community college, four paths emerged from our modified induction analyses. Table 1 displays the number of participants that followed each path. Gender-specific pseudonyms are used for the experiences describing each path.

Table 1
Community College Paths (n=26)

Path	Number	Percent
Career	11	42
Heating Up	7	27
Traditional	6	23
Dual enrollment	2	8

Community college career path

Participants who followed the career path pursued postsecondary education for economic gain and first completed a number of courses, certificate or associate's degree at a community college in a career area (e.g., hvac, nursing, auto repair). Fred, a career path participant explained:

I didn't know much about college, but was told that I would be a good mechanic and could make more money if I completed the community college program. So that is why I enrolled at the community college—to make more money.

After working for a number of years, career path participants returned to postsecondary education to complete a baccalaureate degree, most often in a field different from the career area. Becky shared:

I made good money working in computers, but after six or seven years it had become too routine, the same thing day after day. I thought, is this the rest of my life ... wasn't there more? I was always interested in who kept track of the numbers. A friend of mine suggested that I check into going back to school ... I was surprised about how many hours from the associate degree counted. (after probing question) I came back to study accounting.

Eight of the career path participants stressed that their experiences at the community college gave them the confidence to return to school. Maria indicated:

My grades had been good at the community college, not all A's but it wasn't impossible to do. It has pretty much been the same, I mean the assignments and tests haven't been that much

harder than the classes I had at the community college. The community college let me know that I could be successful in college....if I had just started working I'm not sure that I would be getting my bachelor's degree.

Community college heating up path

Participants who followed the heating up path enrolled at a community college in a career field, not planning on earning a baccalaureate degree. Each of these individuals indicated that encouragement from faculty at the community college "heated up" their interest in continuing their education and served as the impetus to transfer to the four-year institution to complete a bachelor's in the career field. Tom told us:

I didn't even know that there was such a thing as a Bachelor of Applied Technology. I enrolled in the computer tech program at (name of Technical College) because of all the want ads I saw for (name of major computer manufacturer). One of my teachers kept telling me about the transfer program that SWU had worked out with them and I was making it in all the classes ... she gave my name to someone at SWU ... and then she showed me some figures about how much more I would make with a bachelor's degree.

The participants in the heating up path did not "stop out" of postsecondary education, maintaining continuous enrollment as they moved from the community college to SWU. Tom continued:

Once I finished the associate, I was able to get a job at (name of major computer manufacturer). I had the choice of working part-time or full-time, but I decided to work part-time so that I could finish the degree faster. I've already been offered a full-time job with them that would mean a huge pay raise, but I've also got an interview coming up with (name of major software company) next week and want to see what happens there.

Other heating up participants worked full-time while finishing their baccalaureate degree. According to Bonita:

After completing the associate program I was able to get a job at the child care center here as a classroom aide. Full-time employment made it possible for me to continue on. My daughter could come here (to the childcare center) for a reduced rate and I was able to take one class free (each semester) as an employee of the university. My daughter started Kindergarten this year—so I took this final semester full-time to do my student teaching.



Community college traditional path

Participants who followed the traditional path enrolled at the community college, completed an associate's degree in a transfer area, and then transferred to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree. Mary shared her first college experience:

I went to ask about going to college ... I had no ideas about what to study ... The advisor told me to start working for an associate's degree ... Now I'm graduating, going to be an accountant and study for the CPA exam.

Other participants were more purposeful in planning for the traditional path. Irma, for example, stated that:

My family lives in (name of city about 40 miles from SWU) and so I started at (name of community college) there. I did two years there and then had to come down here to earn my bachelor's degree.

Community college dual enrollment path

Two participants were in a dual enrollment program with a community college during the senior year of high school. This program allows the student to take college-level courses and have them count for high school credits. Tuition is waived for all students admitted to the program, with each student responsible for a \$5 per-course records fee. Jacob completed math credits through the dual enrollment program, even though he was not completely aware of specifically what he was doing, and immediately after high school graduation enrolled at SWU.



Math always was easy and fun. I had these teachers in high school (name of town) who seemed to like me ... I suppose it was because I did so well in math. Anyway, they told me about taking college credits while in high school. I trusted them and let them do whatever it was that they did, and when I came here I had built up lots of credits in math. Even my parents didn't know about the program, but they were very happy (when they found out).

Susan was well aware of the dual enrollment program and she completed 30 hours of college credit, the maximum possible. After graduating from high school, she attended the community college on a full-time basis for an additional year, completing an associate's degree and then transferred to the university.

I remember my counselor gave me a letter about the program and I took it home for my father to look at it. He checked the program out quite a bit and then told me that it made more sense for me to participate in this program and then get an associate's degree before my bachelor's degree.

Paths to the Baccalaureate Beginning at a Four-Year Institution

Among the group of baccalaureate completers who began postsecondary education at a four-year college or university, four paths emerged from our analyses. Table 2 displays the number of participants that followed each path. Gender-specific pseudonyms are used for the experiences describing each path.

Table 2

Four-Year Paths (n=37)

Path	Number	Percent
Traditional	15	41
Reverse transfer	9	24
Multiple	7	19
Dual 4-year	6	16

Four-year traditional path

Participants who followed the traditional path enrolled at SWU and attended only that institution in completing the baccalaureate degree. This path, however, does not mean that the participants attended on a full-time basis and graduated within a four to six year time period. Marisa explained to us:

My husband and I have worked out our schedules so both of us can go to school. We never thought about an associate's degree ... he's been going part time so I could finish, then he will go to school full-time. We've been very fortunate to have his family here (to assist with child care).

We found only three traditional path participants who followed a more "typical" college experience, each of whom were second-generation college. Vanesa explained:

There was no discussion about 'going to college' with my parents, it was expected that I was going to complete a bachelor's degree as a minimum. My parents did ask that I consider staying at home and attending SWU, they said that way I wouldn't have to work to help pay for my education. So I took a full load each semester and graduated in four years. I worked on-campus in the library, usually 10 to 15 hours a week, but just for spending money. One summer I did take a couple of classes and continued working part-time at the library, the other summers I worked full-time at (name of fast food restaurant).

Four-year reverse transfer path

Participants who followed the reverse transfer path initially enrolled at a four-year institution, then transferred to a community college, completing at least 15 credit hours before returning to a four-year institution. Two common factors contributed to the experiences of the participants that followed this path. The first factor was a lack of academic success, as Jacob explained:

I was a big jock in high school and the teachers always helped me get through. When I came here I thought it would be like high school ... I also did too many parties and really had no discipline. Finally I was kicked out but they told me I could come back if I showed them that I could earn grades and be responsible. I stayed out of school for awhile and then started at a community college, got my associate's with decent grades, and then they told me I could come back.

Other participants in the reverse transfer path had "moved away from home" to attend a four-year institution. They did not enjoy their experience and returned home, enrolling in a community college. Isabel clarified that:

Before the fall semester started, I had only spent two days in the city, and an afternoon on the campus when classes weren't in session. I should have spent more time there. (Name of the institution) has a really good reputation, but I just didn't like it. I thought living in a big city would be neat, but it was just too big and really expensive. I didn't like living on campus—they showed us apartment style living when I visited, and then I was stuck in a rundown dorm ... I didn't get along with my roommate, she was more into the social scene and I was more into studying. My grades were ok, but I didn't want to go back after Christmas. One of my friends was taking classes at the local community college. When I saw her at Christmas she told me about how great it was ... it was easy, I went out one afternoon and was admitted and enrolled that same day. I don't regret coming back at all.



Four-year multiple path

The multiple path does not mean simultaneous attendance at two or more institutions. Rather, participants who followed the multiple path initially enrolled in a four-year institution, transferred to another four-year institution, and then attended additional two- or four-year institutions prior to receiving their degree. The multiple path experiences occurred because of relocation, because participants were members of the military, were trailing spouses, because of a job transfer from one location to another, or because they attended multiple four-year institutions in metropolitan areas before moving to the SWU region. Javier described his sequence of attendance:

I spent seven years as active-duty military after high school and took courses at three military bases, one four-year university had classes at two of the bases and then I took a few classes from another four-year institution at the third. Then I moved to (name of metropolitan city) and I took classes at (name of private, four-year college) and the local community college. I moved here three years ago to work for (name of governmental organization) and started taking classes at SWU. So five different institutions ... wow, that seems like a lot.

Four-year dual 4-year path

Participants in the dual 4-year path were all from the SWU region. As with the reverse transfers, the dual 4-years had "moved away from home" to attend a four-year institution and returned to the geographic region after a semester or a year. Subsequently they enrolled at SWU to complete their degrees. Three explanations illustrate this experience. Enrollment management practices focusing on financial aid attracted three of the participants to the institutions, but as Cristina found:

I had a fellowship to (name of national recognized research university) that covered tuition, fees, room and board for my first year. But the cost of all that went up about 10% the sophomore year and the fellowship didn't go up at all. My job covered my books, other living expenses, and travel home at semester, but it wasn't enough to cover these other costs ... and I'm smart enough to figure out that the costs would have continued to go up but not the financial aid. So I came home and enrolled here.

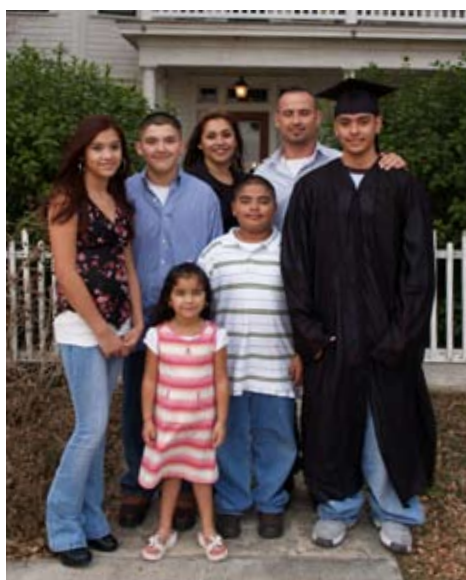
One other participant also returned for financial reasons. In this case, his father had become ill and he returned to the SWU region to help with the family business. The two other participants in the dual 4-year path returned because of changes in their majors. Both experiences are illustrated in Miranda's story:

I went to an out of state institution and during my freshmen year really began to question my choice of a major (finance). I decided that I wanted to become a teacher and went to talk with an advisor in the education department. I knew that I wanted to come back to this state after finishing college, but there wasn't any agreement between these two states about teacher

certification. To teach in (name of state that SWU is in) you have to complete an approved, I think that is the right term, degree. I didn't want to teach in the other state—so I moved back. I thought I would take a few classes at SWU in the spring, living at home, and then I would try to get in at (name of state flagship university), but I liked it here so I stayed.

Navigating the Path to the Baccalaureate

As mentioned in the methodology section, we drew upon the findings of previous studies to guide our interpretive approach of analyzing the notes, interview summaries, and interview transcripts. Particular factors or characteristics that have been reported to positively or negatively impact the baccalaureate attainment of Hispanics is included in the narrative that follows, but our analysis focused on identifying broader themes. Thus, the reporting of the analysis is organized in three stages: approaching the path, following the path, and reaching the destination.



Approaching the path

The participants shared many stories of how their extended families were influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary education. Family members who influenced and encouraged the participants to pursue postsecondary education included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as immediate family members. The common theme of family influence and encouragement is that education pays—the more college you have, the greater your income will be. More than two-thirds of the participants referenced some type of role that family played in their interest and

then expectations of attending a postsecondary institution, yet only 38% indicated that a family member had attended or graduated from college. Very few of the participants spoke of postsecondary aspirations or expectations prior to the junior year of high school.

Only one participant completed a GED, all others were high school graduates. A few reported high school grades of C or lower, but no one indicated that they had been retained during their K-12 years. Approximately one-half of the participants indicated that the high school curriculum adequately prepared them for postsecondary education, but frequent concerns were expressed about a lack of interest from high school teachers and counselors for those students that were not in the top quartile. Peers were rarely mentioned when participants discussed approaching the path. The few mentions indicated influence on the institution attended—“my friends were going there, so I really didn't look at other options” was the way Alicia phrased it.

Following the path

Fifty-nine of the sixty-three participants enrolled in a college or university immediately after completing high school. Their patterns of attendance (full- or part-time) varied during the undergraduate experience, but only one participant completed their bachelor's degree by attending only part-time. The group who began at the community college reported more variability in attendance pattern, and the career path participants had all stopped out of postsecondary education for a period of time. For the most part, however, the graduates had maintained continuous enrollment when they were pursuing the degree. The enrollment patterns of the participants are explained by the broader theme of scheduling factors—a theme that centers on family responsibilities and finances.

Only one participant did not work during the entirety of their postsecondary experience. In terms of work, however, scheduling factors refers primarily to a lack of support from employers in terms of employees' educational pursuits. Time and again the participants shared stories of having to choose between going to college or maintaining employment due to a complete lack of flexibility in work hours. Therefore, an individual might work a 9 to 5 job for a semester, taking one or two classes in the evening, to earn enough money to allow them to take a full-time schedule of classes the next semester and work part-time.

Other financial aspects are also included in the theme of scheduling factors. If something needs to be repaired or replaced (car, home appliance, roof) or if there are unusual expenses (medical, marriage) the participants increased the hours they worked (some took a second part-time job), spent less (taking fewer classes), or did both. Few spoke of trying to maintain a full-time load and dropping classes because of work, and all of those that did indicated that they did so only once. Family responsibilities also play an important role in the theme of scheduling factors. Some participants spoke of contributing to the finances of parents or other relatives. Nearly one-half of the participants were married or parents. Participants that were parents spoke of the particular challenges of scheduling around their children's school hours as after school care was not always available at the school and for some was not within their financial resources. A number of parents indicated the "trick" of not always scheduling classes or work during school hours, but to keep some of this quiet time for studying.

A corollary contributing to this theme is the perception the participants held towards student loans. A number reported utilizing a short-term, institutional loan program that was paid off within the semester. Those that did incur student loan debt used phrases such as "no other choice" and "last resort". As only two of the participants did not relate a "financial barrier" as part of their experience following the path, it appears that the ability (or art) of this theme is a key component to avoiding a stumble or fall.

Reaching the destination

The participants in our study overcame challenges/issues/barriers to completing the bachelor's degree. Common in the descriptions of their experiences was the characteristic of approaching their situations as challenges to overcome rather than avoid. Each spoke of a particular moment or situation when they realized they had the capability to realize their goal. The common theme among the participants that completed the baccalaureate is self-efficacy. In using this term we are following Bandura's (2001) viewpoint of self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to follow the courses of action required to realize given goals.

Some participants reflected on "first" experiences, the day that they chose to attend class rather than skip or the first time they told friends "no" to an evening out and stayed home to study. Others mentioned facing significant financial or life decisions, purchasing a home or car or getting married, and realizing that, for them, the goal of completing a bachelor's degree had become more important. From this moment of realization, the participants to a person spoke of developing an ardent sense of pride as their accomplishments moved them closer to their goal attainment.

An important component in the development of high-levels of self-efficacy was having a champion of their educational pursuits. Champions may have provided financial support, but the participants mostly noted the constant recognition of achievements and encouragement to persevere towards their goal. Bandura (2001) identifies such actions as social persuasions, one of four sources that affect self-efficacy. Nearly 85% of the participants spoke of having a champion. In rank order these individuals came from the immediate or extended family, peers, faculty members (both current and former), and people in positions of responsibility (ministers, community leaders, employers).

In summarizing the realization of their goal, participant responses fall into three threads. Four-fifths of the participants spoke of the importance of a college degree as more than just an employment qualification, using phrases like "a better life". Almost 40% made reference to the American dream of educational opportunity and the importance of serving as role models for other Hispanics. Slightly less than 30% informed us that their goal had changed—they were either pursuing or planned to pursue an advanced degree.

The Community College as a Path to the Baccalaureate

A fundamental question is whether the community college serves as a barrier to baccalaureate completion for Hispanic students. The overwhelming response from the participants in this study is that it does not. Eighteen of the twenty-six participants that followed a community college path did not enter postsecondary education with the intent to earn a bachelor's degree. Those that followed the career and heating up paths indicated that they gained confidence in their academic abilities while attending the community college. Many in the career path

stressed that this initial experience with postsecondary education enabled them to secure better-paying jobs, thus providing sufficient financial resources for them to later pursue the baccalaureate. Nine participants that entered postsecondary education at a four-year college or university followed a reverse transfer path to the baccalaureate. These individuals “turned” to the community college because of the lower-cost or because of a lack of academic success at the four-year institution. All indicated that without this option they would not have completed a bachelor’s degree. As a culminating question, we asked participants to make recommendations about pursuing the baccalaureate for current Hispanic high school students. The most common recommendation was to utilize the community college, either through dual enrollment in high school or by initially enrolling in the community college and then transferring to a four-year institution.

Conclusions

Hispanics who completed a baccalaureate degree at this nonselective university followed multiple paths in attaining the bachelor’s degree. Their experiences are not sufficiently explained by simply indicating the type of institution where they entered postsecondary education. Adelman (2006) has stressed the importance of understanding the complexities of enrollment patterns for all students. From the experiences of the participants in our study, we describe four different paths to the baccalaureate that began with enrollment at a community college and four different paths to the baccalaureate that began with enrollment at a four-year institution.

We also drew from the available literature to search for the broader essence of the lived experiences of the participants in this study. We found three distinct themes that outline a beginning, middle, and end to the phenomena of attaining the bachelor’s degree. The theme, education pays, explains why the overwhelming majority began postsecondary education. Eighteen (29%) did not, however, enroll in college with the goal of earning a bachelor’s degree. A theme we call scheduling factors, explains the wide variation of enrollment patterns as the participants continued down the path. Financial and family factors were the dominant challenges/issues/barriers that the participants faced and greatly influence this theme. Characteristics that demonstrate a strong level of self-efficacy emerged as the theme that distinguishes the participants in this study from those who have stopped or left paths to the baccalaureate.

Participants reported a number of the characteristics that have been found to negatively impact baccalaureate completion (NCES, 2002; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). In terms of financial characteristics, an overwhelming number of the participants were financially independent and close to one-half reported working full-time (or working multiple part-time jobs equal to full-time employment). In terms of family or personal characteristics, an overwhelming

number were from a lower socio-economic background, 75% had parents who had not earned a bachelor's degree, 62% attended college on a part-time basis for at least one semester, almost 40% had children or dependents, and 10% were single parents.

Two additional challenges/issues/barriers emerged from the experiences of the participants in this study. Slightly more than 20% of the female participants referenced a "macho" attitude among males in the region, one that was not supportive of their educational goals. In addition, 11 individuals indicated that they had changed majors and faced the challenge of "losing hours".

The participants also reported three characteristics that have been found to increase the chances of completing a bachelor's degree (Arbona & Nora, 2007). All but one of the participants was a high school graduate. All but four of the participants enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after graduating from high school. Not including the working years described in the community college career path, only five of the participants did not maintain continuous enrollment in pursuit of a degree.

As a result of the low baccalaureate completion rates found among Hispanics who began postsecondary education at a community college, the viability of a community college path to the baccalaureate has been questioned (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Fry, 2002; Swail et al., 2005). From the perspective of the participants in this study, the community college facilitated, rather than inhibited baccalaureate attainment. It is important to note, however, that the role of the community college in the baccalaureate paths of the participants in this study follows what Adelman (2006) has termed purposeful transfer as the overwhelming majority completed degrees and formal programs of study, not random courses.

Recommendations

The single recommendation of the researchers is for additional studies on the paths that Hispanic students follow in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree. As enrollment patterns have become increasingly complex, examinations of the types of institutions attended, the sequences of attendance, and how these paths develop and are navigated will add further to efforts to understand and improve Hispanic completion rates.

From the phenomenological framework, we also present the recommendations of the participants in the study.

1. Information about postsecondary education—types of institutions, programs they offer, requirements for degrees, and financial aid opportunities—needs to reach both Hispanic parents and youth in the upper elementary years (5th-6th grade).
2. Sessions on attending college—conducted by Hispanics who are currently enrolled in postsecondary education or have recently completed degrees—should be held for Hispanic parents and youth in junior high.

3. Information about dual enrollment programs for qualified high school students and articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions should be part of presentations on attending college (elementary and junior high years), not a last second “discovery”.
4. Continuous enrollment is important. If you are not sure about your major, take general education courses rather than drop out. But take something every semester, including summers.
5. Find out about academic help—tutoring, faculty, office hours, how to develop skills (note taking, test taking)—before you need it, not after.
6. Take responsibility for your education. Realize that you decide to go to class or to skip, to stay at home and study or go out with friends, to stay in college or buy a new car.
7. Recognize that you can complete a bachelor’s degree. I did it, others have too—so can you. And then do it!

References

- Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Arbona, C., & Nora, A. (2007). The influence of academic and environmental factors on Hispanic college degree attainment. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30, 247-269.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-26.
- Berg, B.L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences, Fifth edition*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods, Fourth edition*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Council of Economic Advisers. (2000). *Educational attainment and success in the new economy: An analysis of challenges for improving Hispanic students' achievement*. Washington, D.C.: Author. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 442890)
- Fry, R. (2002). *Latinos in higher education: Many enroll, too few graduate*. (Report for the Pew Hispanic Center. Washington, DC). Retrieved February 15, 2006, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org>.
- Fry, R. (2003). *Hispanics in college: Participations and degree attainment*. ERIC Digest. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 480917)
- Fry, R. (2004). *Latino youth finishing college: The role of selective pathways*. (Report for the Pew Hispanic Center. Washington, DC). Retrieved February 15, 2006, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org>.
- Harvey, W.B., & Anderson, E.L. (2005). *Minorities in higher education: Twenty-first annual status report, 2003-2004*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Heller, J. (2006, Aug). *Using "path dependency" as a method in historical research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Retrieved December 14, 2006 from <http://www.allacademci.com>.
- Hoachlander, G., Sikora, A.C., Horn, L., & Carroll, C.D. (2003). *Community college students: Goals, academic preparation, and outcomes* (NCES 2003-164). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Laden, B. V. (1992, October). *An exploratory examination of organizational factors leading to transfer of Hispanic students: A case study*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Minneapolis, MN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 352922)

- Laden, B.V. (2001). Hispanic-serving institutions: Myths and realities. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76, 73-92.
- Lee, V.E., Mackie-Lewis, C., & Marks, H. (1993). Persistence to the baccalaureate degree for students who transfer from community college. *American Journal of Education*, 102(1), 80-114.
- Merriam, S. B. (Ed.) (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary institutions: 1999-2000*. NCES 2002-168. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 468124)
- Page, S.E. (2005). Path dependence. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 1, 87-115.
- Pierson, P. (2004). *Politics in time: History, institutions, and social analysis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. (2003). *From risk to opportunity: Fulfilling the educational needs of Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 14, 2006 from <http://www.yic.gov/paceea/final.html>.
- Rendon, L.I., & Nora, A. (1989). A synthesis and application of research on Hispanic students in community colleges. *Community College Review*, 17(1), 17-24.
- Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swail, W. S., Cabrera, A. F., & Lee, C. (2004). *Latino youth and the pathway to college*. (Report for the Pew Hispanic Center. Washington, DC). Retrieved February 15, 2006, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org>.
- Swail, W. S., Cabrera, A. F., Lee, C., & Williams, A. (2005). *Latino students and the educational pipeline. Part III: Pathways to the bachelor's degree for Latino students*. (Report for the Pew Hispanic Center. Washington, DC). Retrieved February 15, 2006, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org>.
- Vernez, G., & Mizell, L. (2001). *Goal: To double the rate of Hispanics earning a bachelor's degree*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 453771)



To order additional copies visit www.tgslc.org. To request permission to reproduce any of the information provided, please call TG Communications at (800) 252-9743, ext. 4732.

© 2008 Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation.