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The Wall Between Latinos and Education

*PART 1: ANALYSIS*

Education is a word in both English and Spanish(Educacion), that refers to something vital to human civilization but something that Latinos haven't been able to easily obtain. More specifically, Latinos here in the U.S have lagged behind other ethnicities in the pursuit of a college education. In a study released by Georgetown University (Carnevale, Anthony P, and Megan L. Fasules) the Latino community here in the U.S was found to have the lowest percentage of college experience. As opposed to their White(74%) and Black(66%) counterparts, Latinos had a low 45% . A further analysis of this issue reveals that Latinos face 3 primary challenges when pursuing a post secondary education: 1) prejudice and bias, 2) high school graduation rates, and 3) acculturation. In this paper, I will analyze how these three things directly impact Latino-Americans wish to go to college. I will also share my personal experience overcoming these challenges and attempt to find solution based on them.

As the fastest growing minority group in the U.S, Latino students--both immigrant and native--now make up 20% of the current elementary and high school population (Catalano, Theresa). With such a large presence in the education system, what exactly is causing Latinos to fall behind their peers in terms of attending college? One possible explanation is the current anti-immigrant sentiment here in the US. In recent months immigration has been a hot topic on the news, causing what feels like a 50/50 split of the country. With the latest presidential election this sentiment has only grown. Donald J Trump has vividly expressed his feelings towards Latino immigrants (specifically Mexican ones) through various actions and tweets. He has been quoted saying things such as “...I want nothing to do with Mexico other than to build an impenetrable WALL…”(@realDonaldTrump,5 Mar 2015) and “ When will the U.S stop sending $’s to our enemies, i.e Mexico…”(@realDonaldTrump, 10 Jul 2014). Specifically looking at the education of immigrants, Trump has made his views clear with his recent decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The program enabled immigrant youth who came to the U.S at a young age to request a 2-year deferral of deportation that could be continuously renewed. With the end of the program so ends the dream of over 800,000 recipients, many of whom are pursuing a college education. Trump’s prejudice is further backed by a large part of the country in examples such as Arizona's HB 2281 Law, which prohibits school districts from teaching ethnic studies courses, or Florida’s Policy which used to allow colleges to treat American-born citizens as non-residents if they can not prove that their parents are in the country legally (Catalano, Theresa). For Latino Americans, all of this feels like a loud message saying “we don't want you here”. Sadly, it is being heard and heavily impacting the Latino community. In a study lead by Jason G. Irzaryy and John Raible, Latino academic achievement was heavily linked with their development of relationships with teachers, counselors, and other academic staff (Irizarry, Jason G, and John Raible). Because a large portion of the population is now openly anti-immigrant, it is not hard to believe that some teachers and staff will stray away from developing these relationships with their Latino students. Without these relationships, the study reveals, Latinos are put into a disadvantageous position to pursue college compared to their non-Latino peers. On top of this, one can only imagine the mental fatigue caused by constantly hearing that you don't belong here. For Latinos attempting to get a college education, statements like this can make it feel like they’re swimming against the current. Thus prejudice and bias can impede the education of the Latino community.

A post-secondary education requires acceptance into a college or university, which requires high school graduation, which many Latino-americans are not achieving. In the past 10 years, Latino-Americans have made a collective push to increase their high school graduation rate. From sitting at the bottom with a 61% high school completion rate in 1992 to now an 83%, Latinos made a massive 22% leap(Carnevale, Anthony P, and Megan L. Fasules). With such an an achievement it's very disheartening to hear that they still lag behind by 10% to their white counterparts. Since these same Latinos and Whites share a classroom, a school, and an education, wouldn't it make sense that their graduation rates should be on par with one another? So what is happening? One explanation is what we label the slow conversion of the economy. In the 1940’s only 4.6% of the U.S population had completed a 4 year degree(Wilson, Reid). This implies that the large majority (95.4%) of the population worked in sectors that did NOT require a college degree. So what does this mean for Latinos? When immigrating into the U.S, Latinos came in with the belief that you don't need to go to school to have a fruitful life here in the U.S, and to an extent they were right. In the late 1970s only two thirds of the entire US population obtained a high school diploma (Snyder, Thomas D, 30). These low graduation rates had very little financial effect on people with no diploma. In fact, back then workers with a high school diploma or less accounted for 64% of people with above median salary earnings in the country (Carnevale, Anthony P, and Megan L. Fasules). Today only 21% of people with a high school diploma or less are sitting above today’s median earnings. This massive shift over the past 50 years occurred at the same time that immigration began to dramatically increase in the U.S. Thus, when coming into the U.S, immigrants carried the belief that post-secondary education was optional. In the Latino community many people believed this, as evidenced by the low graduation rates. This sentiment-- that you don't need college to be successful-- is something that our parents told us. Those who still believe this are undergoing a trial by fire as they are slowly realizing that times have changed and having a college degree is becoming a requirement to succeed in this country.

The 3rd and biggest challenge Latinos face is a mental one. When coming to the U.S, or growing up as part of any minority group, adolescents face the constant challenge to accommodate their beliefs, cultures and opinions to fit more in line with that of Americans. This process is known as acculturation, and it is something Latinos fight on a daily basis. Today, approximately 38% of the Latino population here in the U.S speaks exclusively Spanish. Anybody can tell you that English is an unspoken requirement if you wish to go to an American college. Thus, it's sad to say but intrinsically anybody in the Spanish-only group immediately faces a disadvantage if they wish to go to college. To further support this, a recent (2009) survey by the Pew Hispanic Center, (Anderson, Doug) revealed “Limited English” as the #2 reason why Latinos in the U.S don't continue their education. Now consider this, even if a Latino knows some english there are studies that suggest that English proficiency is “highest among those with a bachelor's degree” (Krogstad, Jens Manuel, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera.) It is the one internal variable that Latinos CAN control, but nonetheless a constant challenge they face due to the difficulty of learning a new language.

Even outside of the language barrier, acculturation has been shown to take its toll in the mental health of Latino adolescents. A 2007 study (Koneru et al) that outlined the correlation between acculturation and symptoms such as stress,depression and psychiatric disorders found that minority groups faced negative side effects as a direct cause of acculturation. Focusing only on Latino groups, the study reports that higher acculturation was associated with things such as depression symptoms, higher deviant behavior, and a “less optimistic outlook”. Pair this with already daunting Latino-American struggles, and it's easy to see that before any Latino can even apply to college, they have to deal with financial inadequacy, social prejudice, and mental health problems.

PART 2: MY PERSPECTIVE

Having been born in Mexico, immigrating here to U.S at a young age and currently pursuing a bachelor's degree, I found myself facing many of these challenges. Starting with the anti-immigration prejudice, I find trouble even turning on the news out of worry to see more and more stories about the “wall” or “how Mexicans are rapist”. It is even a tougher pill to swallow that the current P.O.T.U.S holds such a massive following, even after he has openly expressed his hate towards so many minority groups. To me and my Latino peers this tells us that there are people amongst us who despise us being here and want us to leave, or even worse things. Coming into college many Latinos fear being exposed to people who openly support Trump's’ anti-immigration sentiment. Quite honestly it's scary to be hated so openly, and because of this many Latinos believe that many Americans at any given university are racist. Due to this, many are drawn away simply by holding notions similar to this at heart. The only thing I believe will change the mindset of those who oppose immigration is the exposure to other cultures, beliefs, and intentions. Many anti-immigrant supporters fear that Latinos are here with bad intentions. With enough exposure to Latinos, I believe these sentiments will slowly go away, and with it so will the prejudice and bias.

Moving onto high school dropout rates. Once here in the U.S, I attended a very diverse high school with an approximate 85% minority student population (U.S News). While there, a lot of my peers took up and prioritized jobs outside of school. This is typical for your average high schooler, what was not normal was the view shared amongst some of my peers that they could simply just drop out and start a career working in a given field. From experience, I can see where this comes from. Just like many of my peers, neither of my parents finished high school. Out of need to support their family, my dad only finished middle school and my mother only got through elementary. This forced them into labor intensive careers that although they supported the family, they were not a desired way of living. For many of my peers, it became somewhat of a habit to do the same and carry along with the outdated notion that “you don't need school to have a fruitful life”. This happened so much over course of my four years there to the point where only about 56%(U.S News) of my senior class was able to walk the stage and receive their high school diploma. Many fell trap to the complacency of making decent money, so much so the they decided to drop out and stop pursuing education. It is sad that this is still a problem, specially after the massive increase in graduation rate amongst Latinos. The only solution I see here is to… well...quite frankly there is no easy solution that is not easier said than done. I believe this is an issue that has been tackled from multiple angles, but with little success. Regardless of that, the high school graduation rates steadily increasing amongst Latinos. If the pattern continues, it is my hope that this issue will cease to be within the coming decade or two.

Finally, we come to acculturation. My biggest perspective on this is the constant stress that comes from it. Whether it be in the form of financial need, family centric decisions, or the fear to pretend to be someone i'm not. Before applying to college, I was tasked with making sure I could first of all afford it, but more importantly, making sure my family could afford it. Back in Mexico it is very common for one's kids to support their parents financially straight out of high school. Deciding whether to go to college was a battle amongst myself. My mentality upon graduating high school was that my parents had given me so much and now it was now my turn to give back. In a leap of faith I decided to lean on them one last time and attend CU, but that was not the end of my battle with acculturation. Being a first-generation college student, my parents weren't able to guide me through the process of how to succeed in college. To me, that put a lot of weight on my shoulders, as I now had to make sure my plans and intentions were clear, my grades remained acceptable, and making sure I was able to help myself through this transition process. I felt almost alone as I didn't not see the large majority of my white peers struggle with most of these things. It goes without saying that not everyone is at an equal playing field coming into college, but it's crazy to me how disadvantaged minority groups are.

With all this in mind, it is clear that the pursuit for a post secondary education is challenged by prejudice, high school dropout rates, and acculturation. Prejudice is at an all time high, as evidenced by the massive support behind Trump. This is something Latinos face on the daily and something that sways people from even visiting a university. Similarly the mentality of financial stability without a high school degree, creates a deadly illusion that stops Latinos from even being to apply into college. Lastly, the constant fight with acculturation disadvantages Latinos wishing to go to college. Simply by living in the U.S Latinos face a series of mental and physical barriers that torment them everyday. With these three problems ahead of the Latino community, there is no doubt in my mind that Latinos wishing to attend college, are playing in an uneven field. Education is a virtue that is slowly becoming a requirement. With minorities expected to become the majority (CNN), it is imperative that we act now on these challenges that they face today.

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