

# Retention of Rural Latina College Students, Engaging Strategic Leadership: A Chicana Feminist Theory Perspective on Retention

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## INTRODUCTION

From their inception, America's rural colleges have espoused the ideal that higher education should be accessible to everyone. However, we know that not everyone has equal access (Santiago & Callen, 2010). The Latina population is a group that is failing in tertiary education; there are multiple studies that tell us why they fail, but this chapter focuses on the rural-Chicana feminist connection to their barriers and discusses what is essential for Latinas to be successful in colleges and universities where statistics tell us Latinas face even greater challenges succeeding in rural colleges. This chapter explores issues and challenges and coping mechanisms that Latinas face in rural communities, and summons the need for change in rural colleges in order to accommodate the unique needs of these students. Understanding the rural college-going participatory experiences of the Latina student population and college personnel capitalizing on what is working for Latinas are essential in order for Latina women to be involved in a positive college-going experience.

The contribution this chapter adds to scholarship is based on the understanding of how rural factors intersect with cultural complexities and gendered-identity needs of Latina rural college-going students, from a Chicana feminist perspective. Rural institutions of higher education will be able to use the results of this research in order to attract Latina students and support their college-going experiences with culturally appropriate services and resources.

We know the Latino/a population is increasing; by 2050, Latinos/as are projected to represent 24.3% of the U.S. population (NCES, 2003). The total population of Latinos in the United States is approximately 17%, K-12 population is approximately 22% Latino, the median age for Latinos is 27, compared to 42 for White non-Hispanics. Approximately 20% of Latino adults (25 and older) had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to 36% of all adults. The college graduation rate is 41% of Latino students that graduated within 150% of program time for first-time, full-time freshmen, compared to 50% of all students (*Excelencia*, 2015).

In spite of the population growth, Mexican-Americans are the largest Latin American subgroup (65%) in the United States and are the least likely to go to college (ETS, 2007; *Excelencia*, 2014; Iturbide, Raffaelli & Gustavo, 2009). Nationally, of those, only 10% of Latina women completed four or more years of college, compared with 13.9% of Blacks and 22.3% of Whites, according to the National Council of La Raza, an umbrella organization for Hispanic groups (2014).

Among the nation's Latinas, rural Latinas are the least likely to attend college. In order to increase the retention and success rates of Latina rural community college students, colleges in rural areas must make it possible for more Latinas to attend and have a positive higher education experience. Academi-

cians need to understand what factors detract from and/or enhance the college experience for Latinas in rural community colleges.

More Latinas live in rural than urban areas, and many colleges are situated in rural communities, (*Excelencia*, 2010, 2014; *Immigration Policy Center*, 2011). According to Carsey Institute (Saenz, 2008), nearly 3.2 million Latinos live in rural areas of the United States, comprising 6.3 percent of the nation's nonurban inhabitants. Latino educational completion is crucial because their educational achievement is lower than other groups (only 19 percent of Latino adults have earned an associate or higher) and the Latino population is rapidly expanding. By 2020, Latinos are projected to represent about 20 percent of the 18-64 year-old U.S. population, compared to 15 percent in 2008; by 2020 Latinos are projected to represent close to 25 percent of the U.S. 18-29 year-old population, up from 18 percent in 2008. Therefore, the higher education of rural Latinas is imperative to the attainment of this goal (Santiago & Callen, 2010).

### Rurality as a Risk Factor for Retention

The White supremacy- hegemonic narratives which are more prevalently felt in rural than urban areas, placed Latinos/as in a precarious position. They essentially removed them from history, by defacing them from popular American history, as seen from the narratives such as Manifest Destiny, Melting Pot, and the Mexican Problem. Their status was the perpetual foreigner, limiting their full rights to citizenship. Seldom did children read about the Aztec-Chicano lineage connection and claim to the U.S. Southwest as Aztlán. Therefore *El Movimiento* such as *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, and Cesar Chavez, were movements to fight cultural and classism oppression. (Bebout, 2011)

Movements like these still go on but are less supported in rural versus urban areas. Nevertheless, according to 2013 data from National Center for Educational Statistics (2015), reported that approximately 12% of the nation's Latinos drop out of high school. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center (2009), 22.1% of Latinos attending secondary education in rural areas drop out. The indicators identified included individual, family, school, and community risk factors (Smink & Reimer 2009). The report cited identified individual and family risk factors with a solid research base, whereas the school and community risk factors identified below were not as strongly supported in the literature. Their reliability as research based factors is on a very different level and should be considered as likely factors.

These represent possible barriers preventing the Latina population from attending or completing rural postsecondary education which affects student success in college. Poverty is a huge barrier. Rural ethnic minority students have increasingly high rural poverty rates, especially for Latina females. According to the 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, in rural America, 29.7% of Latinos live below the poverty level with more females than males living in poverty (Census Bureau, 2014b). Therefore, higher education attainment in rural areas is critical in order to break the cycle of poverty and to increase their economic well-being (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012).

Contributing to Latina poverty is the fact that numerous Latinas fail to graduate from high school and are forced to rely on Medicaid. According to National Women's Law Center (NWLC) (2009), 41% of the nation's Latinas do not graduate from high school in four years with their class, and 35% of Latinas are forced to rely on Medicaid (NWLC, 2009). Failure to graduate from high school and reliance on Medicaid has negative implications for the well-being of Latinas and their children, as these two factors contribute to the cycle of poverty (Gloria, 1997).

Because the under-education of Latinas is a contributing factor to high poverty and single-mother families, the economic stability/mobility of Latina mothers and their children are at risk if Latinas do not receive a college education (Gloria, 1997); this is especially true in rural areas where more than half



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