# LATINO MASCULINITY

# Underlying Factors in College Persistence Levels

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DESPITE GROWING NUMBERS, LATINOS LAG BEHIND WHITES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. THIS GAP IS ESPECIALLY SALIENT FOR LATINO MEN, WHO EARNED ONLY 37.6 PERCENT OF ASSOCIATE'S AND BACHELOR'S DEGREES AWARDED TO LATINO STUDENTS IN 2010. THE FOLLOWING STUDY USES IN-TERVIEWS WITH THIRTEEN ETHNICALLY DIVERSE, FIRST-GENERATION, SELF-IDENTIFIED LATINO MEN CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITIES IN THE GREATER BOSTON AREA TO EX-PLORE THE INFLUENCES LATINO MEN IDENTIFY AS IMPACTING THEIR COLLEGE SUCCESS AND PER-SISTENCE RATES. GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW DATA REVEALS THE CORRELA-TIONS BETWEEN PREVIOUS ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND FAMILY INFLUENCE ON PARTICIPANTS' ABILITY TO GRADUATE. THE PARAMOUNT ROLE OF PARTICIPANTS' CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND THEIR EFFECT ON HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS WAS A SURPRISING AND UNIQUE FINDING. MASCULINITY AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS WERE, THEREFORE, FOUND TO PLAY A KEY ROLE IN COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSISTENCE FOR THE MEN IN THIS STUDY. THIS ARTICLE ALSO DISCUSSES IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS, EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY GROUPS, AND UNIVERSITIES.

# INTRODUCTION

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Latinos are growing in number and influence in the United States. By 2050, Hispanics/Latinos will comprise 29% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Despite growing numbers, Latinos lag behind whites in higher education, with only 13.5% of associate's degrees and 8.8% of bachelor's degrees being awarded to students identifying as Latino or Hispanic in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, only 37.6% of associate's and bachelor's degrees were awarded to students who identified as male and Latino.3 The discrepancy between Latino female and male college enrollment and graduation rates is linked to sociocultural factors, such as gender roles, socioeconomic status, criminalization of the Latino male, and neighborhood and environmental contexts. This paper investigates the academic, social, and psychological factors that influence Latino males' decisions about postsecondary education and the implications of these decisions.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the recent increase in research about ethnicity and higher education, there remains a large gap in the literature on Latino men in college. Ojeda, Navarro, and Morales<sup>4</sup> documented the link between family, identity, and college persistence intentions for Mexican-American men, concluding that, given the family's centrality to gender identity, high parental involvement positively impacted college persistence intentions. The strong relationship between Latino male identity and the concept of family has been established not only for Mexican-Americans, but also for Latinos of all ethnic backgrounds.5 Specifically, the importance of "familismo," which "encompasses the loyalty, commitment, and dedication to "la familia" is repeatedly identified in the literature as a significant influence on Latino consciousness.6 Latino males are expected to support their family financially and emotionally-a reality that undeniably affects their educational, professional, and personal development.7 The concept of family can be a double-edged sword, providing extensive support and positive involvement for Latino male college students, but also demanding a level of commitment that often interferes with college persistence.<sup>8</sup>

The complex topic of Latino male college persistence involves the interrelation of a variety of systems and factors. The literature identifies four prevalent themes that have large influences on Latino males' college access and completion: (a) level of awareness of educational obstacles on the part of communities and administrators; (b) the importance of the concept of family; (c) the impact of male peers and mentors; and (d) the absence of outreach programs specifically designed for this population.<sup>9</sup>

Clark et al.'s study on educator perspectives on Latino male educational pursuits reveals "the strong influence of the Latino patriarchal and cultural norms imposes unique demands and expectations on Latino men."<sup>10</sup> Family pressure to fulfill the male role, paired with institutional and financial barriers to Latino male college access and retention create an environment unsupportive of Latino males' educational pursuits. Researchers also found that peer and mentor relationships can enhance success and persistence of Latino men in high school and college. Understanding the unique cultural experience of Latino males is a key component of Latino success in higher education.

Contextual variables contribute to the lack of Latino male access to higher education. Administrators and students identified failing high schools (lacking in materials, committed teachers, mentors, helpful counselors) and home environments with little to no knowledge of the college admission and application process (financial planning and aid for college, university culture, etc.), as serious impediments to getting into and persisting through college.<sup>II</sup> Both the challenging nature of the college application process and the lack of awareness of opportunities available hinder Latino males' college attendance and completion. Negotiating the financial stresses of college, acquiring financial aid, and paying for school without familial help work to create an "uphill battle".<sup>I2</sup>

"Despite growing numbers, Latinos lag behind in higher education, with only 13.5% of associate's degrees and 8.8% of bachelor's degrees being awarded to students identifying as Latino or Hispanic in 2010." Numerous psychological factors strongly impact Mexican-American students' decisions to pursue and obtain a college degree.<sup>13</sup> Precollege racial micro-aggressions and family pride are significant factors in Mexican-Americans' intentions and abilities to complete college. Cerezo et al. documented that teachers, administrators, and peers discouraged college aspirations, claiming that college would be "too difficult," that Latino male students would not be "capable," or suggesting that they join the military, attend a trade school, or even "engage in criminal activity".<sup>14</sup>

Although the literature identifies issues that Latino students face in accessing college, it is primarily focused on Mexican-American college students. While Mexican-Americans are the largest of the Latino populations in the United States,<sup>15</sup> it is essential to gather information from a diverse and nationally representative sample to make generalizations concerning Latinos as a whole. Secondly, student voices are lacking in the literature. Scholars, administrators, and psychologists discuss Latino males' college persistence, but there are very few studies in which Latinos themselves speak on the issue. The role of methodology is crucial here. Few studies are qualitative and provide space for students to voice their experiences in all their nuanced complexity.<sup>16</sup>

The present study explores a more diverse group of male Latino college students' constructions of the factors that influence their ability to complete a college degree. It seeks to provide an opportunity for Latino males to talk about their access to college, their challenges once there, and their understandings of how their identity and cultural background influence whether or not they graduate.

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand how Latino men define the obstacles and challenges they have encountered or are currently experiencing in their attempt to complete a college degree through the lens of a sociocultural framework. In other words, what factors do Latino college males describe as impacting their educational options, decisions, and experiences?

Thirteen self-identified Latino men between the ages of 18 and 23, currently enrolled in four-year universities in the Greater Boston area, were individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview. Participants attended predominantly white, private, four-year institutions. Using a snowball sampling method, 2-3 original participants reached out to other Latino men who were interested in participating in the study. This sampling method allowed a transfer of trust between participants and researcher, an essential component to the ability to gather valid and reliable data.<sup>17</sup> Participants were screened for ethnic background to ensure diversity in the final sample, which consisted of mostly American-born Latinos with ethnic ties to Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala. One participant was born in Puerto Rico but immigrated to the United States at the age of ten, while another self-identified as a second-generation Chicano. Participants attended high schools in California, Florida, Texas, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York. All identified as low to low-middle income.

Given the study's inductive nature, interviews were conducted in a flexible format, relying on prepared questions as guiding points. If the participant felt strongly about a topic, focused on certain themes, or even raised a new perspective, the interview would be directed towards that particular topic. Thus, data elaborate on and deviate from the literature to keep the process open to fresh perspectives and understandings.<sup>18</sup> The focus of this study was how the individual men understood and constructed the obstacles and challenges to completing a college degree, and an open-ended interview ensured that participants had the space and opportunity to explore and share experiences freely. Interviews ranged in length from twenty to ninety minutes and were recorded and transcribed with signed consent from participants. Coding was informed by themes found in the literature.<sup>19</sup> and revealed themes that



STUDENTS MARCH IN WASHINGTON FOR THE CAUSE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION. (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

matched those found in the literature review as well as other themes not discussed at all in the literature. The names of participants in this study are pseudonyms.

# RESULTS

Findings addressed academic preparedness, family dynamics, and gender roles. There was also an emphasis on gendered understandings of help-seeking behaviors that were specifically relevant to college navigation, success, and well-being. In this research, "help-seeking" includes academic assistance (tutoring, professors office hours, etc.), career and fiscal advising (additional funding needs, etc.), and psychological assistance (stress management, emotional support, etc.), in both formal (professional) and informal (peer and family network) settings. Refer to Table 1 for a guide to theme incidence by interview.

#### Previous Academic Experiences

Participants identified high school environments and interactions as strong influences on perceptions of college access, academic preparedness once in college, and awareness of resources and services supporting college transition. The academic rigors of college contributed to participants' beliefs about self-efficacy, as participants explicitly feared they would not be able to overcome poor preparation, thus creating a sense of inadequacy and failure. Limited prior exposure to academic supports exacerbated feelings of inefficacy and hopelessness, and participants highlighted the importance of resource awareness and willingness to access resources as essential to academic progress and success.

#### Family Influence

Family factors contributed to participants' conceptions of education, success, and well-being. Enrolling in college was not a personal choice for personal success, but a choice to provide a better future for the participant, parents, and future family. The role of the family was paradoxical — family encouragement and support were important to participants' intentions and decisions to attend and persist through college, but family expectations and re-

	Previous Academic Experiences	Family Influence	Masculinity/Gender Roles	Help-Seeking Difficulties
Interview 1	x	x	x	x
Interview 2	x		x	x
Interview 3		x	x	x
Interview 4	x	x	x	x
Interview 5		x	x	х
Interview 6	x	x	x	x
Interview 7	x			
Interview 8	x		x	х
Interview 9	x	x	x	x
Interview 10	x	x	x	x
Interview 11	x	x	x	x
Interview 12		х	x	x
Interview 13	x	x	x	x

TABLE 1. THEME INCIDENCE PER INTERVIEW

sponsibilities negatively influenced graduation rates. Participants talked about financial stresses and the expectation of taking care of the family as potential barriers to college persistence.

#### Masculinity

Gender played a significant role in how Latino males situated their education in relation to identity, family, and their future. Participants perceived education as necessary for the financial independence and security needed to support a family. While some participants wanted future partners to be financially independent, most identified the male as the primary provider. Self-sufficiency and success in the primary provider role were essential to how these men made decisions about their education.

Masculinity also played a major role in how participants sought help during college. Participants' constructions of masculinity blended traditional Latino constructions of gender with mainstream American notions. This "Americanized machismo" acknowledges self-sufficiency and independence, and when integrated with a multicultural construction of gender, strongly influences how these men viewed formal and informal help-seeking. Gender policing in the Latino community also discouraged help-seeking considerations and behaviors.

#### DISCUSSION

The role of the family and the importance of access to resources in high school and college for first-generation college students were significant points for many participants. The lack of secondary school resources rendered not only the college application process, but also the transition to college life, difficult. Andres, a sophomore, illustrates this point:

I didn't know that you could get free tutoring...I didn't know that there were people on campus that you could go to and talk to and try to appeal a financial aid decision. None of that stuff was available to me in high school, so the possibility that they would be available in college...didn't even cross my mind.

Andres' experience showcases how a prior lack of access to resources and assistance continues to affect individuals even as they enter more encouraging environments. Family support and expectations for higher education permeated the discussion on what influenced participants' goals of going to college. Participants emphasized the need "to achieve what my parents were never given the opportunity to achieve. I was born here [in the United States] so...there was no reason for me not to go to college-if I wanted to succeed." Attending college and receiving a diploma could realize the value of parents' hard work. Families demanded that sons avail themselves of American privileges. This theme pervaded all interviews. One participant talked about his family's immigration to the United States in this context, explaining how his parents struggled with the most difficult jobs, and that "Going to college meant showing them that all they had sacrificed was not done in vain. My job was to get to college and I did." Obtaining a college degree seemed to be individually and family-motivated; participants identified the benefits of a college education as the main incentives behind enrolling in, and graduating from, college.

The intersection of gender and culture was the most critical theme. Participants deconstructed their journeys to college and during college within the context of their identity as Latino men, noting how gender and culture shaped their conceptions of education, success, and ability. Gender construction, defined by one participant as an "all-consuming way of thinking that tells you how you have to live as a man," shaped participants personal and professional aspirations. Attending college was not only something that participants felt they owed their parents, but also something that ensured financial success for themselves as male role models.



ONCE AT COLLEGE, LATINO MALES OFTEN STRUGGLE TO ACCESS RESOURCES AND SUPPORT. (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Definitions of success included the ability to "support my family, have a house, and take care of my wife and kids... My parents always told me that I needed to be able to take care of my family—I need to be the provider and college will help me to do that." The concept of family itself, for many of the participants, corroborated the literature on the concept of familismo. Interviewees perceived an expectation of responsibility, not only to future families, but also tence. Participants branded the ideal Latino man as possessing qualities that coincide with traditional masculine norms, such as independence, virility, emotional control, industriousness, aggression, and dominance.<sup>20</sup> Yet, participants identified Latino masculine norms to be "exaggerated" and "much more intense." As Benny noted, "Latinos have very clear separations between men and women. It's very traditional in a sense and not open for negotia-

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to parents and siblings, which extended particularly to female family members. As David, a senior, shared, "If something were to happen to my father, or any of my brothers, I would have to take care of my mother and sisters—it's just what I would have to do—it's what would be expected of me and what I would expect, too." This selfimposed obligation to support family members, and to support women specifically, reinforces "Latino male as provider" as an integral component to Latino male identity.

This concept is also closely linked to being "the man of the house." Most participants identified a direct expectation from family members, both male and female, to fulfill this role by virtue of being a male in the home. "When my dad died...my mom told me that I was the man of the house now...I had to be strong and take care of the family," shared Gustavo whose father died when he was nine years old. "Those words stayed with me-I still feel like I am the man the house, like I have a family to take care of, like ... this [college] isn't just about me, you know?" The interplay of gender-based family expectations and success yielded very specific reasons why Latino men were in college. Going to college, therefore, meant guaranteeing their ability to assume the role of provider and support current and future families. Such interplay created a paradoxical effect: a motivator to college success in the face of positive family involvement and support, became a stressor in the face of family hardship and adversity.

Participants' constructions of masculinity were at the crux of the conversation on college achievement and persis-

tion." Gender roles in the Latino community are closely tied to cultural identity and social practice where, "being a man is not thrust upon me, it's shown to me. I know I will make them proud if I [imitate]."

Women also sustain and adhere to these conceptions of Latino masculinity. Leal, a junior, explained that his mother instructed him how to be a man:"be strong...stand up and dominate-to not let anyone disrespect or put me down. My father wasn't around and so she said I had to be strong for her and the family." His aunts and sisters agreed: "men can't cry, they have to provide, they have to be tough." Cousins and sisters considered a man who was not in control unattractive because he "wasn't acting like a man should...it's a cultural thing." Gender roles are so entrenched in the Latino community that women uphold and co-construct them in spite of growing support for gender equality and a movement away from the traditional, and often destructive, understandings of gender in the Latino community (as cited by other participants). A few participants shared how some people are challenging gender norms in the Latino community, but these individuals seem to be the exceptions.

Messages and lessons about gender during upbringing affected the development of participants' individual and relational identities. Identities as individuals were closely linked to communal identities as Latino men, with integrated personal identifiers and tastes:"I like cars, and there are a lot of guys in my family that also like cars. We bond over that, you know. I like cars because they're dirty and hands on and fast and kind of dangerous—all of us [Latinos] just like that [stuff]." Gender and gender identity inform decisions and impact the choices and experiences of Latino males in the college environment.

All but one participant identified help-seeking in relation to masculinity as a major determinant of success in both the academic and socio-emotional domains of college. Asking for help was an essential but difficult behavior. What it meant to be a Latino man clashed with the willingness to engage in help-seeking. "A man has it all together, doesn't need to ask anyone for help—they're independent and strong and have it all under control," shared Cesar, a sophomore, "you go for help and...I know it sounds stupid, but, it's almost like you are no longer a man."

Academic help-seeking was defined as going to professors' office hours, building mentoring relationships with campus leaders and administrators, and accessing resources like tutoring and academic advising. Seeking academic help resulted in psychological and social difficulties. Cesar explains that the most profound obstacle to help-seeking is his reluctance to admit that he is having a hard time: "If I admitted that I needed help [then that] meant that I didn't have everything under control-that I needed somebody else to help me out, to do what I couldn't". Taught to be independent, Cesar viewed asking for help as losing self-sufficiency. "I definitely didn't want my friends to see me struggling-they looked like they had it all together and I pretended to, too." Help-seeking as dependency was common among most participants and clashed directly with internalized constructions of masculinity-signaling not only a lack of independence but also a suggestion of failure.

Gender policing, a social phenomenon that imposes normative gender expressions on individuals who are perceived to be non-conforming to the expectations of their perceived sex,<sup>21</sup> was especially notable among Latino men. Hyper-policing of gender systematically prevailed in the Latino community. As one participant shared, "You start acting a little funny, like too sensitive or like you care too much about a girl or a test or something, your [Latino] friends will check you...they'll let you know you're not being a man and they won't let you live that...down." Another participant agreed: "My Latino friends are so much more obsessed with acting manly and being stereotypically male than any of my other non-Latino friends."

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This hyper-policing also affects socio-emotional, helpseeking behaviors. "You can't be weak—you don't cry, you don't let people get you vulnerable...you act strong and you keep your cool. The only time you let emotions get in the way is when someone disrespects you or your loved ones." The expectation of emotional stoicism is critical to Latino men's psychological well-being; needs are shrouded to present the façade of incontestable "maleness." Participants talked about facing stress, anxiety, emotional, and interpersonal problems during college but not feeling comfortable disclosing such experiences to anyone because of the dissonance between emotional expression and male identity. Such issues were handled privately and independently:

When I feel stressed out, or something is going on with my family or a girl, I just go and hang out by myself. I deal with it myself. I don't need anyone to listen to me—I don't like talking about my feelings. I just feel uncomfortable doing it... I don't know how to go to people and talk to them about my private life—I can't even describe how I feel sometimes to myself, how am I supposed to go and do that with someone who will probably just judge me for it?

Fear of judgment and gender-policing prevented many participants from self-disclosing and encouraged them to distinguish between support networks in their lives.

Several men discussed talking to certain friend groups about specific problems depending on whether or not those friends ascribed to prevailing Latino understandings of masculinity. Peter, a freshman, shared, "I go to my white guy friends about an issue with a girl or about feeling stressed out. They are so much more open to that kind of stuff. When I go to my Latino friends, they just make a

"'My Latino friends are so much more obsessed with acting manly and being stereotypically male than any of my other non-Latino friends."" joke out of everything." Corroborating Peter's sentiment, Joseph shared, "My Latino friends just make jokes...they tell me to man up and that everything will work out fine but sometimes you just need someone to say they understand how you feel and that it's okay." Dealing with emotional or psychological needs through humor was also prevalent. The fact that Latino men felt more comfortable talking about emotional topics with non-Latino friends amplifies the validity of exploring Latino males' concepts of masculinity and gender-policing and their effect on college persistence.

Participants identified emotional and relational difficulties as having a negative impact on academic involvement and achievement. Not talking about stress and feelings led to distress and inadequacy: I was too easily overwhelmed, I felt so much pressure; school just started to become harder and harder for me. Believing that he had to do everything himself, one participant remarked that, "any challenge that comes your way becomes ten times bigger, ten times harder to overcome, ten times more likely to break you down." Latino males identify help-seeking as especially pertinent to college persistence, and this shows that helpseeking is relevant not only academically, but also socioemotionally. Help-seeking seems to be a critical variable in the context of Latino men's low rates of college persistence.

# LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

There are several limitations of this study. First of all, the small sample size prevents generalizability of findings, and the snowball sampling method, albeit necessary in transferring trust, can result in a sample that is homogenous in terms of experiences, values, and beliefs. A study that uses a random probability sampling method would limit such a risk. Another limitation is the unique educational make-up of the sample. Given that all participants derived from predominantly white, private universities, findings cannot be linked closely to the experiences of students at public or more ethnically diverse university settings. The general environment of the university and the presence of greater academic and social supports for Latino men may have influenced the shared experiences of the current study's participants.

# STRENGTHS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The paucity of literature that includes ethnically diverse Latino male voices on the topic of college persistence was a significant motivator for this study, and thus contributes to the literature by including an ethnically diverse sample in an in-depth, qualitative exploration. Participants shared experiences, perspectives, and understandings in a way that validated their contributions.

This study also reflects the present demographics of a significant portion of America's Latino population. Participants' ethnic ties reflect the majority ethnic composition of the Latino population in the United States, and their identification as first-generation also reflects the immigrant make-up of Latinos between the ages of 18 and 25.<sup>22</sup>

# CONCLUSION

Constructions of masculinity appear to be the most salient influence on Latino male enrollment and persistence intentions in college. Despite the importance of resources and support services in high school and universities, participants described their struggles in college as primarily influenced by their understandings of identity and masculinity in a cultural context. Participants' positionality as first-generation Latino-Americans enabled a gender identity constructed as a hybrid of both American and Latino cultural influences in an "Americanized machismo" paradigm.

The inflation of gender roles in the Latino community creates an environment of hyper-gender policing that restricts many Latino men in college from engaging in behaviors that would threaten their masculinity, even when such behaviors might ensure academic or personal success. Masculinity as a performance, relevant and established in the literature,<sup>23</sup> seems to be more significant for Latino males. Furthermore, the interplay of gendered identity constructions and help-seeking behaviors was a significant finding. Participants explicitly related internalized understandings of masculinity to their inability to engage in help-seeking behaviors, yielding a dynamic with very noticeable academic, financial, and psychological ramifications. Obstacles pertaining to academic and financial help-seeking, attending professors' office hours, making use of on-campus tutoring resources, seeking financial aid advocates, etc., have to be overcome for Latino males to logistically make it "through" college.

The socio-emotional, psychological piece of help-seeking was particularly critical. Cultural conceptions of what it means to be a man were closely linked to psychological and emotional well-being, undoubtedly important factors in college persistence and success. Participants' unwillingness to seek help in all domains for fear of losing their masculine appearance, in addition to their refusal to obtain emotional support from friends, significantly undermined their academic performance and psychological well-being. Participants explicitly linked their emotional and psychological health to feelings of self-efficacy and motivation for college completion. This reveals the expected finding that masculinity plays an important role in mental health, which is essential to college persistence.

# IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study provides evidence for the complexity of factors that influence Latino men's college persistence levels. Improving high schools and universities to better address Latino men's unique academic and social needs is crucial to ensuring higher college graduation rates. Validating and understanding the significant role of the family in the lives of Latino men and its influence on their academic and professional decisions must be a tenet of any intervention or outreach program that aims to work with this population. Additionally, understanding the role that masculinity plays in Latino male identity development and definitions of appropriate and inappropriate help-seeking behaviors is vital for educators and psychologists, if they seek to improve up the low rates of Latino male degree attainment. Finally, future research should further explore the intricate relationship between masculinity, help-seeking, and psychological distress. Participants noted psychological well-being as critical to college success and persistence, and yet, they are unwilling to seek support. Exploring the causes of such contradictory behavior may uncover ways to develop a more productive synergy between gender identity, help-seeking behaviors, and academic, social, and emotional well-being among Latino men in college.

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# ENDNOTES

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