

**“Examining the challenges that Mexican American students face in the US university system, how are the nature of the challenges influenced by the students' genders?”**

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UWP1: Introduction to Academic Literacies

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*I am writing this to discuss the challenges that Mexican Americans face in the US college system. From personal experience I can attest that many students who are first generation Mexican American students face challenges throughout their post secondary education. Most of the time just getting into college is a great challenge for many. For example, finding the resources necessary to get into college can be one of the greatest challenges, because many Mexican American students do not have the privilege of asking their parents for help when navigating the college process. I myself had to find information about colleges and the college application process on my own because my parents do not have the knowledge. As a first generation student going into college I had to seek help from others and seek resources that helped me get into college. For example, I reached out to my counselor and different teachers, so that I can become better informed about college and the college process. It can be overwhelming and stressful to have to find all the information on your own however it is a great accomplishment once you get into college.*

## **Introduction**

It is widely known that college students face various obstacles in their college journey. However, Mexican Americans tend to face more challenges in part due to being part of a minority group. As a result, many Mexican Americans face a variety of challenges throughout their post secondary educational journey. Some of the challenges that they encounter include financial hardships, motivational challenges, and lack of support or pressure from family and friends. However it is not well known if some of these challenges or any other challenges are influenced by their gender. This is why the challenges that Mexican American college students face should be examined and researched to determine whether they are influenced by their

gender. This paper will explore the challenges that Mexican American students face in the US university system and how the nature of the challenges are influenced by the students gender.

### **Gender Roles in Mexican Culture**

#### **Women**

In Mexican culture there are often roles that are placed upon women. These roles include being a child bearer and a domestic helper or home caretaker. As a result of the domestic responsibilities that they have it can oftentimes become more difficult to pursue a higher education (Lopez 1995). Women are given duties in the household which may interfere with their education since they have to complete their various household duties which can be labor intensive while still keeping up with their college education. Melba Vasquez explains that “Mexican American Women, often first-generation college students, experience role conflict as they attempt to balance the relative rewards and costs of marriage and children with an education and, ultimately, a career” (1982). As a result Mexican American women have a difficult time choosing between obtaining a higher education and the traditional roles that are imposed on them by their culture like the role of a mother and wife. They are faced with a decision of following the roles that are imposed by their culture or following a higher education.

#### **Men**

Mexican American men are often given the role of being the breadwinner of their family. They are socialized to be the one who supports the family and pursues a career outside of the home (Ojeda and Flores 2008). This is why men feel pressure from society and their families to get a job to help support their family financially, and thus do not continue their education. Oftentimes for men an education is not seen as something that is necessary because they can seek

employment without having a college education. Yet most of the time well paying jobs that don't require a college education are very labor intensive. Ojeda and Flores found that some male Mexican American college students "believed that an education was unnecessary to gain sufficient income to support their future household" (2008). This shows that Mexican American men can be "deterred from college graduation because of high school dropout, military recruitment and joining the labor force instead of enrolling in college (Saenz and Ponjuan 2009 as cited by Ojeda, Navarro, and Morales 2011). This shows that men do not have great emphasis on pursuing their education because they have been told that they do not require an education to get a well paying job to eventually be the breadwinner in their families.

### **Mexican American Students in College**

Over the course of time there has been an increase in the number of Mexican American students who enroll and attend college. In 2016 only 15% of Latinos had a bachelor's degree compared to 41% of whites (Vega 2016). However many Mexican American students who enroll in college courses do not finish their college education. Since many are first generation students they are more likely to leave college within their first two years of college (Ishitani 2003). Some may leave due to the different challenges and obstacles that they face in college; "Possible barriers anticipated by Hispanics in pursuing their career goals may include financial constraints and ethnic discrimination" (Rivera, Chen, Flores et al 2007). As mentioned before many Mexican American students face financial hardship, motivational challenges, and pressure from family and friends which may contribute to their abandonment of college. There is however a difference in the amount of Mexican American male and female students who attend college. Data has shown that less Mexican American men compared to Mexican American women are enrolled in college. For example Hurtado, Saenz, Santos and Cabrera found that only 37% of

men were enrolled in college as opposed to 63% of women (2008). This proves how there is a discrepancy between the challenges that Mexican American men and women may face in college. This suggests that Mexican American men may face more obstacles or barriers than Mexican American women when attending college due to the low rate of enrollment for Mexican American men.

## **Challenges**

### **Both Men and Women**

Both Mexican American women and men are faced with pressures of being the first in their families to attend college and pursue a higher education and often times without guidance (Morales 2018). This is a constant challenge that is very present in their everyday life throughout their college journey. As a result they may suffer from stress and can find it difficult to keep studying because they feel like their entire families future depends on them. They also face financial hardships because “chicanos anticipate a much lower median parental contribution towards the cost of college (\$194) compared to white students (\$1,145 per year)” (National Board on Graduate Education 1976 as cited by Vasquez 1982). Also the US Bureau of the census of 1970 reported that Mexican American families earn about 70% as much income as nonminority families (Vasquez 1982). This means that oftentimes Mexican American students come from families that do not make much money which is why they can only pay for about half or less of what a white student’s parents would be able to contribute financially for their education. This is one of the greatest obstacles that they face when attending college because if they can no longer afford college then they must stop their education. Unfortunately, most parents of Mexican American students do not have well paying jobs and thus makes it more difficult for their children to attend school and focus on their education because they must get a

job to support their parents in paying for their education. For example Cerezo et al found that 6 out of 12 latino students had to work a high number of hours per week to support their family and college costs (2013).

Jennifer Engle states that data from the 1955-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Study shows that 47% of all entering postsecondary students were first generation. As a result, about half of the people entering college are first generation and might have a limited understanding about financial aid. Therefore this can become an issue because “lack of information about financial resources, such as loans, grants and scholarships, to help pay for college expenses” can also prevent students from pursuing an education (Hurtado- Ortiz and Gauvain 2007). As a result, first generation parents' lack of experience and knowledge about post secondary education may result in misconceptions about the process of going to college and “particularly about college costs and financial aid, which may lead them to discourage their children from pursuing postsecondary education.” (Engle 2006). This would then become a challenge for first generation students to overcome as they have to find information about scholarships, and financial aid on their own.

Another challenge that they face is that they get discouraged by peers. They get discouraged by peers because they do not believe that they are capable of achieving a post secondary education. For example Ojeda and Flores (2008) cited Cheng and Starks (2002) in which they state that both male and female Mexican American students felt that “teachers and friends had lower educational aspirations for them than for their white and african american peers”. Also the unfamiliarity that their parents have with the US school system is a barrier that they must overcome and prevents their parents from being involved in their children’s education (Bohon et al 2005 from Ojeda & Flores 2008). Unfortunately most of their parents are not

familiar with the US education system and thus can not help guide their children in obtaining a college education. Their parents can't help them navigate the US school system like the parents of their peers who are familiar with or have gotten an education through the US school system. This is why Mexican American students must go out of their way to find information and resources that will help them get into college. As this shows, Mexican Americans have to face the barriers of obtaining knowledge about getting into college and the college process on their own as well as deal with the discouragement of peers to attend college. Like Cerazo et al states, "young Mexican American men contended with microaggressions in the educational environment, which often implied that Mexican Americans were not 'college material'"(2013). Also "while Hispanics are optimistic about their educational chances, they lack key information and resources that might help improve their educational outcomes" (Kao and Tienda 1998; as cited by Ovink 2011). Despite parents wanting their children to attend college, there are many challenges that they face when it comes to supporting their children.

### **Female college students**

Mexican American women also continued to have a higher number of enrollment than men: "from 1980 to 2008, there has been a 12.5% increase in Latina enrollment in postsecondary education, and Latinas outnumber Latino men in enrollment in undergraduate and graduate programs" (Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani 2010; as cited by Piña-Watson, Jimenez and Ojeda 2014). Despite women having a higher number of enrollment they still face challenges. The main challenges that Mexican American women face when it comes to pursuing a higher education is going away from home. For example, in a study by Gloria and Castellanos (2012) they found that Mexican American women often faced the challenge of leaving home to attend college (Morales 2018). This is a challenge for women because they are challenged by their parents on

leaving home because their parents worry that they will stop meeting family obligations. Some may be accused of abandoning their family for not fulfilling or meeting family obligations because they value “familismo [which] is the concept of connectedness to the home and family” (Morales 2018). Martinez agrees that due to familial ties sometimes students are prevented from attending a school that is far from home (2012). Lopez also agrees that parents are more hesitant to let their daughters attend college than their sons (1995). This may result from views that women are more vulnerable than men as well as views that Mexican American women must not be away from their homes. These views stem from *machismo* which are views that men have more power over women and independence than women. As a result many fathers are hesitant to let their daughters leave for college because they will lose power over them. But despite this obstacle Mexican American women continue to attend college because ultimately, “students with greater family connectedness were more prone to achieve academically as familismo assisted in their pursuit for their college degree”(Morales 2018).

### **Male college students**

Mexican American males face the challenge of having financial responsibility for their homes as well as their parents. For example Lopez (1995) cited Muñoz (1986) and stated that Mexican American men “have financial obligation to their mothers”. As a result many Mexican American male college students are forced to get a job because they must provide some financial support to their mothers and families. Men also “experience pressure from society and from their families to sustain the family's well being, first and foremost through financial contributions” (Cerezo et al 2013). This means that they may put their studies aside in order to find employment to help support their families. This is a challenge because it may prevent them from fully focusing on school due to having to work. Another challenge that Mexican American



men face is discouragement from other male peers (Lopez 1995). Most of the time they are seen as not capable enough of attending college or doing well in college because of stereotypes that are set on Mexican American men. This leads to them feeling like they can not pursue an education and can lead to imposter syndrome. Thus they must focus on pursuing an education while trying to ignore the comments of discouragement from peers. For example Cerezo states that they are often reminded of the notion that Mexican American Males are not college material (2013). As a result they must keep themselves motivated and try to prove those stereotypes wrong. For instance, Martinez found that students were urged to pursue a higher education “to resist and combat negative stereotypes about Latinos or Mexican Americans both regionally and pan-ethnically”(2012).

However, it can become hard to keep pursuing a higher education when too many people doubt their abilities to perform well. This is why men are also more likely to see challenges as a sign to stop attending school and enter the military, workforce or engage in gang activity (Lopez 1995). Mexican American males are also exposed to gang activities which can become a challenge for them when pursuing an education (Cerezo et al 2013). This would become a tremendous hardship for men because if they decide to join a gang then they will most likely have to stop pursuing an education because they will have to obey the orders of the gang leader and may be required to leave school. Being involved in gang activity will also limit the amount of time that they can dedicate to their education and thus will be pushed to abandon their studies.

### **Motivation to pursue a higher education**

Many Mexican American students are motivated to pursue a higher education because they have seen the struggles that their parents have faced without having an education.

“Because many of these parents did not complete a degree/education, they made their child's education a priority and encouraged them to pursue a college degree as it a “vehicle to escape poverty” (Vega 2016; as cited by Morales 2018). Like Ojeda, Navarro and Morales stated, many Mexican American students feel that they need to achieve their parents' dream of having a better life (2011). This is why many feel so strongly about continuing their higher education despite the challenges that they may encounter. Their parents' experience with lack of education which was often experiences of labor intensive work with minimal pay is also a great motivation for them to get an education. They believe that college is the “primary way to achieve social and economic upward mobility” (Cerezo et al 2013).

### **Women**

Specifically Mexican American women share a sense of duty to their family (Ovink 2011). They feel that they have a duty to pursue a higher education in order to help their families succeed. They want their families to be able to benefit from their education, not just themselves. Teachers have also motivated Mexican American women to continue their education. For example, “Hacket et al. found that teachers had a significant influence on the career salience and educational aspirations of a sample of women in their senior year of college, with female teachers exerting the most influence” (Rivera, Chen, Flores, et al 2007). Mexican American women are also seeking a college education as a way to obtain independence and long term stability. They want to become more independent so that they do not rely on their parents or future husbands financially like how it has been culturally imposed on Mexican American women for so long. Thus Mexican American women who are college students are trying to break the stereotypes that they should stay at home and let their husbands work because they want to

be able to financially support themselves. Like Ovink describes, Mexican American women are working towards a college education as an investment for long term stability (2011).

### **Men**

For Mexican American men their motivations consist of their value of dignity and honor as well as self motivation to better themselves. Oftentimes Mexican American men value dignity and as a result may feel pressured “to demonstrate honor to their family by getting a college education”(Ojeda, Navarro, and Morales 2011). They feel that having dignity motivates them to pursue higher education because they are working towards something that will help them better their life as well as their families life. Ojeda, Navaro and Morales also found that many Mexican American men felt that they wanted a college education because they wanted a better life for themselves and because it would give them better opportunities. This belief is often shared by many Mexican American men and women because they have seen the struggles that their parents have faced without an education. Cerezo et al found that Mexican American men are motivated to go to college because they are the first ones in their families with the ability to go to college and they “intend to complete college as homage to their parents’ sacrifices in migrating” (2013).

### **Conclusion**

Overall it seems that Mexican American men face more challenges than Mexican American women when attending college. Women mostly face the challenge of leaving home because it is something that can be difficult to do since they do not want to be seen as someone who abandons their family and family obligations. However, men encounter the challenges of providing financially for their parents, and receiving discouragement from peers to achieve a greater education. But despite the obstacles that they face they try and push through because they have a lot of motivation to get a higher education. It is seen that men and women are determined

to pursue a higher education in order to make their parents' dream a reality. They are highly motivated to get an education not only for themselves but for their family. One of their biggest motivators is their families because they strive to help their families achieve greater economic status. Overall Mexican American college students should be supported throughout their college education because they face a lot of obstacles. This is why this research is important because more people should be aware of the challenges that Mexican Americans face when attending college.

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