

RESOURCE GUIDE

**SERVING UNDERGRADUATE FIRST-GENERATION
LATINX/A/O COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



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**CENTER FOR
FIRST-GENERATION
STUDENT SUCCESS®**

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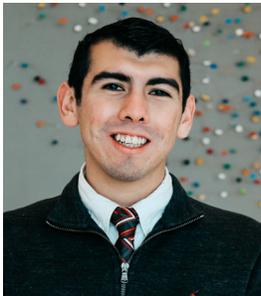
ABOUT THE CENTER FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT SUCCESS

The Center is transforming higher education to drive first-generation student success effectively and equitably across education, career, and life. We provide data, training, and expertise for a growing network of colleges and universities around the country to scale and sustain the important work of serving first-generation students. The Center aims to acknowledge the intersectional experiences of first-generation college students. It offers an outlet for sharing cutting-edge research and current media conversations, opportunities for engagement through online learning, conferences, and events, and access to a bevy of programs and services intended to improve first-generation initiatives across higher education.

ABOUT RESOURCE GUIDES

In collaboration with experts in the field, the Center has curated resource guides covering a variety of topics specific to first-generation student success. The purpose of the resource guides is to offer supplemental items and create stronger connections to topics covered. Each will include an overview, recommendations, a list of articles and/or examples featuring helpful approaches, and references. To remain current, these resource guides will be updated periodically.

AUTHOR



Antonio Duran, PhD (he/him/él), is an assistant professor of higher and postsecondary education at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. His research examines how historical and contemporary legacies of oppression influence college student development, experiences, and success. Connected to this central thread is his interest in how scholar-practitioners use this knowledge in their practice. He uses critical frameworks (e.g., intersectionality, community cultural wealth, queer of color critique, quare theory, jotería studies) to complement the field's understanding of racism, heterosexism, trans oppression, and other forms of marginalization on college campuses.

Originally from Phoenix, Arizona, Duran found a love for higher education during his years as an undergraduate student at New York University. It was there that he first encountered questions of what it means to be a first-generation queer Latino cisgender man in educational settings and in society broadly. He discovered that educators can create environments for students to explore who they are and to learn how they can contribute to a more socially just world. After his time at New York University, he earned a master's degree in student affairs in higher education from Miami University and a doctorate in higher education and student affairs from The Ohio State University.

OVERVIEW

As the overall Latinx/a/o population in the United States rises, Latinx/a/o communities continue to be one of the fastest-growing college student demographic groups (Flink, 2018; Mora, 2022). Scholars have amplified the diversity of communities that exist within Latinx/a/o college student populations (Garcia & Cuellar, 2023; Núñez, 2014) and have echoed other research that shows Latinx/a/o communities are not a monolith (Zong, 2022).

One subgroup that has received the attention of educators, policymakers, and community partners is first-generation Latinx/a/o students. The need to spotlight the realities that first-generation Latinx/a/o students face at institutions of higher education is urgent. Recently, *Excelencia in Education* (2019) reported that Latinos were more likely than other racial and ethnic groups to be first-generation college students. Researchers have consistently demonstrated that these communities encounter unique challenges and opportunities in educational settings given their racial and ethnic positioning and educational generational status.

This resource guide unpacks several themes found in the literature on first-generation Latinx/a/o students, including access to and aspirations for higher education; academic experiences, preparation, and outcomes; persistence and resistance; and navigating college and community.

Access to and Aspirations for Higher Education: Undergraduate Years and Beyond

Literature on first-generation Latinx/a/o¹ college students has described the significant journeys that these individuals take to access higher education (Clayton et al., 2019; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Moreno, 2021; Olive, 2010; Vega, 2018), including graduate education (Martinez, 2018). Given the integral role that family plays in Latinx/a/o cultures, it is unsurprising that research has underscored how familial influences shape college choice and aspirations for first-generation students (Clayton et al., 2019; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). However, family relationships are not always a positive influence, as some have shared how first-generation Latinx/a/o students experience high rates of guilt because of the opportunities they have available to them that their families do not have. These include enrolling in schools as opposed to having to work to provide for their family (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Moreno, 2021).

¹The term *Latinx* emerged as a gender-neutral label for Latino and Latina as outlined by Salinas and Lozano (2019). Throughout this report, the term *Latinx/a/o* is used to acknowledge the broad spectrum of gender identities represented within these communities. However, when referring to works published by other authors, *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* are used as they appear in the respective publications to honor the authors' choices.

First-generation students may also see college as an opportunity to give back to their communities (Olive, 2010; Vega, 2018). Certain support network individuals, such as high school counselors, contribute to first-generation Latinx/a/o students' academic aspirations (Tello & Lonn, 2017; Vega, 2018). However, limited perspectives on how these students make decisions and perceive their access to graduate education also exist (see Martinez, 2018, for an example).

Academic Experiences, Preparation, and Outcomes

Beyond articulating the pathways that first-generation Latinx/a/o students traverse to reach higher education, researchers have examined academic experiences, preparation, and outcomes relevant to these populations (Boden, 2011; Latino et al., 2021; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; Torres et al., 2006; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Although scholars have communicated that first-generation Latinx/a/o communities may not be as academically prepared for college as their peers, these students may perceive their level of preparation differently given that they feel they have taken multiple steps to ensure their success (Boden, 2011). This sense of self-efficacy has proven valuable for first-generation Latinx/a/o students' academic success (Latino et al., 2021) as they seek support services that will assist them academically (Torres, 2019; Torres et al., 2006). The impact of accessing resources is a consistent theme in the literature, such as in Mendez and Bauman's (2018) study on first-generation Latina/o students' participation in a college assistance migrant program, and it proves vital for students' educational trajectory.

- **Disciplinary Experiences:** Some research has explored the topic of academics for first-generation Latinx/a/o college students within specific disciplinary contexts, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Espinoza et al., 2013; Verdin & Godwin, 2018) and ethnic and Chicano studies (Marrun, 2018; Nuñez, 2011). These studies underscore how the climate at an institution can vary among academic disciplines, especially for first-generation Latinx/a/o students. In fields such as engineering, first-generation Latinx/a/o students may lack a sense of belonging and may experience environments that further racism and privilege cultural capital (Espinoza et al., 2013; Verdin & Godwin, 2018). Conversely, ethnic and Chicano studies provide first-generation Latinx/a/o communities with the language and skills necessary for navigating their collegiate environments (Marrun, 2018; Nuñez, 2011). The role of ethnic studies, including Latinx/a/o studies, has evolved and has become instrumental to various subgroups of Latinx/a/o student communities, including those coming from South and Central American as well as Caribbean regions (Cabán, 2003).

Navigating College and Community

Moreover, researchers have explored how first-generation Latinx/a/o college students navigate off-campus experiences and communities while in college, such as work (Nuñez & Sansone, 2016) and family relationships (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Levya, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Participants in Nuñez and Sansone's (2016) study on first-generation Latino college students viewed work as a way to improve their educational experiences, connect to campus environments, and build valuable skills. The research focused on family brings to light a more paradoxical relationship. Some first-generation Latinx/a/o students draw strength from their familial

connections (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2021), whereas others cited family as a source of stress or increased pressure (Levy, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Persistence and Resilience

It is imperative that higher education not view first-generation Latinx/a/o college students from a deficit perspective; instead, it is important to uplift their persistence and resilience (Gutierrez-Serrano et al., 2023; Mendez & Bauman, 2018; O'Neal et al., 2016; Vega, 2016). For example, research by Gutierrez-Serrano et al. (2023) on Latina first-generation students revealed that participants drew strength from their ethnic identity and connection to Latinx/a/o communities. These students recognized that they were not alone in their pursuits. Such recognition of assets meant that they were more optimistic about their ability to reach their goals. The same applies to undocumented and DACA, first-generation, and Latina/o students, albeit facing a different set of circumstances given immigration policies. Namely, O'Neal et al. (2016) articulated how noncitizen first-generation Latina/o students frequently turned to their families instead of seeking support elsewhere given their documentation status. Still, they persisted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this overview is a snapshot of research on first-generation Latinx/a/o students, the perspectives collectively represented in the literature may help inform practice in higher education and student affairs. Following are several recommendations for practitioners.

Advocate for policies attentive to first-generation Latinx/a/o students. First-generation Latinx/a/o students are inherently agentic and resilient, but they still face barriers in educational settings. For this reason, higher education and student affairs practitioners must contribute to advocacy regarding institutional-level policies beyond those specific to first-generation Latinx/a/o communities. The need to advocate for policies (e.g., the development of financial aid packages, the creation of support services) has been stressed in the literature (Piedra et al., 2011). Other research, such as that by Latino et al. (2020), argues that making policy shifts to improve financial aid has a significant impact on reducing gaps in first-year outcomes for first-generation Latinx/a/o students. Practitioners on college campuses can assist with such practices by ensuring that emergency funds are available for these student demographic groups or by working with those in advancement or development offices to create institutional-level scholarships for these communities.

Tap into students' cultural wealth. Too often, institutional programming and resources are incongruent with the cultural capital that first-generation students possess, especially those who also identify as racially and ethnically minoritized. Yet research such as Gil's (2016) shows that creating culturally relevant practices that align with Latinx/a/o communities within colleges and universities improves outcomes like college completion. Institution leaders must focus on culturally relevant programming and services, especially those that draw from the community cultural wealth of students (see Yosso, 2005, for a discussion of

community cultural wealth). Professionals can ensure this is the case by conducting audits of their initiatives that include questions such as these: “Would first-generation Latinx/a/o students know how to access this resource? Do these initiatives align with cultural knowledge that may be found in Latinx/a/o communities?”

Attend to the rich diversity of first-generation Latinx/a/o students. The attention to first-generation Latinx/a/o students’ vast identities and abilities challenges the monolithic understanding often associated with these communities. Practitioners must also recognize the ways that diversity is rendered invisible even within this umbrella. Scholars have drawn attention to how social identity categories such as socioeconomic status (Pyne & Means, 2013), undocumented status (O’Neal et al., 2016), or ability (Torres, 2019) shape these students’ experiences. It is critical that educators account for these differences and nuances in first-generation Latinx/a/o student communities.

Understand and engage in differential practices across institution types. Connected to the need to account for the diversity of first-generation Latinx/a/o student communities, higher education and student affairs practitioners must also consider how to reach these groups differently based on the institutional type they are attending. Research has emerged specific to contexts like community colleges (González, 2020) or Hispanic-serving institutions (Latino et al., 2021). Drawing from this literature, it is incumbent upon practitioners to consider how their student populations face unique opportunities and barriers based on the institutional context in which they are located. An example of this is that if a practitioner is at a largely commuter campus, they should anticipate that their first-generation Latinx/a/o students engage largely with home or family communities and should make efforts to involve these groups in assignments or co-curricular programming.

Engage family, home communities, and other partners. First-generation Latinx/a/o students constantly negotiate relationships with family, home communities, and other partners (e.g., K-12 educators). Higher education and student affairs professionals must become adept at creating links to these groups so that first-generation Latinx/a/o students learn how to best leverage the knowledge they gain from these people while mitigating potential sources of stress. For example, programs could be developed that allow first-generation Latinx/a/o students to discuss the challenges and opportunities they face in navigating family relationships. Web resources specific to the families of first-generation Latinx/a/o students could also be developed.

RESOURCES

- The Center for Mental Health in Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles, has published [this report](#) on first-generation college students from Hispanic families.
- A [white paper](#) from the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities discusses Latino first-generation college students.
- Excelencia in Education has [several reports](#) that center on Latinx/a/o students, including those who identify as first-generation.
- Books on Latinx/a/o student experiences that include discussion of first-generation identities include the following:
 - ▶ [Latinx/a/os in Higher Education: Exploring Identity, Pathways, and Success](#), edited by Angela E. Batista, EdD, Shirley M. Collado, PhD, and David Pérez II, PhD
 - ▶ [Studying Latinx/a/o Students in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of Concepts, Theory, and Methodologies](#), edited by Nichole M. Garcia, PhD, Cristobal Salinas Jr, PhD, and Jesus Cisneros, PhD
 - ▶ [High-Achieving Latino Students: Successful Pathways Toward College and Beyond](#), edited by Susan J. Paik, PhD, Stacy M. Kula, PhD, Jeremiah J. González, PhD, and Verónica V. González, PhD
- Examples of institutions that are developing programs and scholarships specific to first-generation Latinx/a/o students include the following:
 - ▶ [Maricopa Community Colleges](#)
 - ▶ [Texas A&M International University](#)
 - ▶ [Texas State University](#)
 - ▶ [North Carolina State University and Wake Technical Community College](#)
 - ▶ [University of Arizona](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Learn from the personal narratives of first-generation Latinx/a/o students through the following media:
 - ▶ This [Tedx Talk](#) features a student, Estrella Serrato, who reflects on her higher education experiences as a first-generation Latina.
 - ▶ This [video](#) showcases Edwin Perez-Hernandez, who describes his experiences as a first-generation college student graduate.
- Blog posts:
 - ▶ [Learning the Ins and Outs of Higher Ed: My Experience as a First-Generation Latino College Student](#) by Aldo Madrigal Olivarez
 - ▶ [The Trials of Being a First-Generation Latina](#) by Emily Escobedo Ramirez
 - ▶ [My Experience as a First-Generation Latino College Student](#) by Cesar
 - ▶ [Lessons From a First-Gen, Working-Class Latinx Student](#) by Alicia M. Reyes-Barriénte
 - ▶ [Hope, Determination and Courage: 7 Inspiring Stories From First-Generation Latino Graduates](#) by Yara Simón
 - ▶ [Through the Eyes of a First-Generation Latino College Graduate](#) by Salvador Blanco
 - ▶ [Being a Latino First-Generation College Student Means I'm Pretty Much a Big Deal in My Parents' Eyes](#) by ziamarcelaa
 - ▶ [The Pressure, Pride, and Perseverance in the First-Gen Latinx Community](#)
 - ▶ [Estarás en Georgia Tech: Scheller's First-Generation Hispanic and Latino Students Share Their Stories](#)
- Podcasts:
 - ▶ [First Gen Latina](#)
 - ▶ An [episode](#) of Nopal Kweenz podcast that focuses on first-generation students
- [30 Things Every First-Generation Latino College Student Should Know](#) by Tanisha Love Ramires
- [Scholarships for First Generation Hispanic Students](#)

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