

THE LARGER ECOLOGY OF LATINO SUCCESS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: WHY SOME LATINO STUDENTS ARE BEATING THE ODDS

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“It really helps if you have your family there supporting you. Which mine did, even my uncles and my aunts – all wanting me to work hard. That’s a lot of pressure too. It’s like they’re all relying on you to succeed.”

-Jazmin Lopez, Whitman College freshman, Walla Walla High School Alumni

Topic: Latinos are the most educationally disadvantaged group in America. The Latino student population, however, is not a homogenous group in which all perform equally. This study examines **why some Latino students succeed academically while others do not**. By examining the factors proven to increase educational achievement among Latino students, educational policymakers and practitioners can better support Latino students, and thus narrow the present achievement gap between Latinos and their Anglo peers.

Methods: *Secondary Research:* I investigated scholarly articles and case studies that explore the complexities of why certain groups of Latino students succeed. *Primary Research:* I conducted a limited qualitative study centered on Walla Walla High School. This study included frequent visits to the high school, five interviews with Latino students, and five interviews with teachers and other administrative staff. From the scholarly literature and interviews, I learned the importance of factors such as high levels of parental involvement and long-term mentoring relationships for the success of Latino students. Based on these factors of success, I concluded my case study by evaluating the programs and policies existing at Walla Walla High School.

Findings:

- The most basic factor in school success or failure involves the youth’s own achievement drive; **family influences and social support provided through schools**, however, are very influential in determining the Latino youth’s achievement.
- Although familial factors are most influential, the school plays a critical role in Latino student success as it can provide formal support through school policies and resources, as well as a venue for students to receive informal support from peers and other adults.
- Policy options and program recommendations frequently focus resources or remediation for the lower-performing students among the minority groups; yet, the achievement gap is a significant feature at the upper-score range as well as the lower and middle-score ranges of Latino and Anglo students.

Recommendations:

- Improve teacher and school personnel relations with Latino parents;
- increase efforts to address family barriers by providing more institutional and personal support for Latino students; and
- focus more programs and policies on helping high-functioning Latino students.

Community Partners: Cindy Gregoire and Diana Erickson, Bilingual Coordinators for the Walla Walla Public School District.