

# What Influences College-Going Pathways for Latino High School Students?

THE VOICES OF ARIZONA STUDENTS



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## ABOUT HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to achieve a postsecondary education. Our work is driven by our four fundamental beliefs in Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership, and we invest in initiatives across the full education continuum.

In Arizona, where Latino students comprise the largest percentage of the K–12 public school population, the Foundation is implementing its Arizona Latino Student Success Initiative focused on preparing all students — but especially Latino students — for success in college and career. Through our Florida Regional Student Success Initiative, Helios is helping first-generation, low-income, and minority students from the state's large population centers in Miami, Orlando, and Tampa achieve a postsecondary education.

Since 2006, the Foundation has invested over \$189 million in education programs and initiatives in both states. To learn more about our efforts, visit us online at [www.helios.org](http://www.helios.org).

Dear Colleague:

This policy brief, entitled *What Influences College-Going Pathways for Latino High School Students?: The Voices of Arizona Students*, summarizes Arizona Latino high school students' perspectives on factors that have influenced their college aspirations and future plans to attend a postsecondary institution. This brief provides the unique opportunity to hear directly from students — in their own words — about the factors that support or impede their entry into college.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the role of the family was emphasized as the most important influence on college aspirations. Individual family members, prior and current family experiences, and family practices influenced students in multiple ways. In addition, the school environment was emphasized as a source of support and information for students as they pursue a postsecondary education. And finally, the brief identifies seven recommendations based on the students' feedback to help boost college-going rates and success among future Latino students.

As we think about the future of Arizona, we must acknowledge the changing demographics of our state and embrace the fact that Latino students make up the largest percentage of our state's K-12 education system. Increasing the number of Latino students who pursue and complete a postsecondary degree is critical to ensuring the future economic stability of our state.

We hope this research will inform and inspire you to join us as we work to expand educational opportunities for Latino students. Arizona's economic development as well as our individual quality of life depend on it.

Sincerely,



Vince Roig  
Founding Chairman  
Helios Education Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vince Roig".



Paul J. Luna  
President & CEO  
Helios Education Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul J. Luna".



## FOREWORD BY HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

We believe that rigorous, high-expectation academic environments are critical to preparing students for college and careers. We also believe that through research-based strategies and practices we can improve the college and career readiness of all students in Arizona and Florida regardless of zip code, race/ethnicity, or other demographics. These strategies, in turn, will better prepare students for the future, ultimately creating economically stronger states in Arizona and Florida.

Helios recognizes that not all students are succeeding at the level we know they can. In Arizona, for example, Latinos have low postsecondary completion rates, especially when compared to non-Latino white students. Only 20 percent of Arizona Latinos hold an associate degree or higher, compared to 40 percent of white, non-Latino Arizonans. Yet, Latinos are the fastest-growing demographic group in the state. Currently, 31 percent of the state population is Latino, with estimates indicating that Latinos will represent the majority by 2030.

Seeking to eliminate the degree completion gap for Latinos, and simultaneously raise attainment for all, Helios' first step was to better understand why college-going and completion rates among Latinos were lower than that of other races/ethnicities. We wanted to know the contributing factors. Were cultural differences diminishing the perceived value of going to college? Were academic factors limiting college attainment?

In 2015, these questions, together with our desire to improve education through research, led us to commission a two-part, mixed-methods study aimed at identifying policy levers to improve postsecondary attainment. In collaboration with Dr. Paul G. Perrault, Vice President and Director of Research and Evaluation at Helios, Dr. Nancy Gonzales and Dr. Leah Doane at Arizona State University led the qualitative portion of the study, aimed at assessing Latino perceptions of higher education. Over the course of a year, they carried out focus groups with Latino students from five Arizona high schools. Their work is meant to describe Latino perceptions of higher education and college-going at a deeper level.

This brief, principally authored by Dr. Gonzales, Dr. Doane, and their research team, adds to the larger understanding of what it takes to improve college-going, especially for those students who have traditionally been underserved. We hope policy leaders and education experts will use the brief to inform strategies to raise postsecondary attainment for all students.

This brief summarizes findings from Part 1 of our mixed-methods research. Specifically, this brief summarizes what we learned from focus group discussions conducted with students from five Arizona high schools relative to the following three questions:

1. What are the most common and impactful sources of influence to support college-going pathways for Latino high school students in Arizona?
2. Are there formal or informal influences that are shared across schools and students at different aspiration levels?
3. How can this information be used to broaden college-going pathways and success for more students?



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this policy brief is to summarize Arizona Latino high school students' perspectives on factors that have influenced their college aspirations and future plans to attend a postsecondary institution after high school. Prior research and national statistics show Latino students in the United States have high postsecondary educational aspirations, as a whole, and have made significant gains in rates of college attendance. Yet, Latinos still lag significantly behind other groups in their rates of enrollment and completion of a college degree, particularly four-year degrees. To better understand factors that support or impede Latino students' entry into the college pipeline following high school graduation, we conducted focus groups with Latino high school students in their junior year and asked participants to discuss who or what has influenced them at this critical stage in their schooling. By using a qualitative approach to understand students' experiences at a deeper level, we hoped to identify untapped resources to boost college-going rates and success among future Latino students.

We first conducted surveys of all students in their junior year in five Arizona high schools to assess their college aspirations and intentions and then used these data to recruit students to participate in focus group discussions. Three focus groups were conducted in each school to allow separate discussions among students reporting they were: (1) definitely planning to attend college, (2) probably or highly likely to attend college, or (3) undecided or not likely to attend college. Several dominant themes emerged from these discussions that are summarized in this brief with illustrative quotes to convey the students' views in their own words.

When invited to discuss what has most influenced their current college aspirations and planning, students emphasized the **role of the family** to a far greater extent than any other source of influence. Individual family members, prior and current family experiences, and family practices influenced students in multiple ways. For example, regular discussion about schoolwork, future aspirations, and the importance of college were important to socialize college expectations within the family. The path to college was perceived as more tangible if a prior family member had attended college and was able to offer concrete guidance and role-models to support college-going pathways. However, regardless of whether or not a student would be the first in his or her family to attend college, family members — especially parents — utilized daily routines and unique cultural practices to help students find motivation, resources, and opportunities to prepare

for college. Many students were explicitly encouraged by parents, as well as others in their community, to pursue college as a means to financial security and a better life, and these students were highly motivated by their sense of obligation to succeed for the sake of their families. However, family obligations were also described as excessive pressure for some students, especially if they did not receive concrete guidance or financial support to match their family's expectations.

Students perceived the **school environment** to also be an integral source of support and information in promoting college aspirations and preparation. Supportive relationships and high expectations from teachers and counselors, college-readiness programs, and access to college resources, (i.e., college websites, help with admissions and financial aid, and college visits) played an important role in college decision-making. These resources were especially crucial to complement family support for first-generation, college-going students. However, some students reported a lack of access to college preparation resources for students in less advantaged schools, and for students that were not in the highest-achieving tracks. Students also reported frustration that teachers and school counselors often used a one-size-fits-all approach and did not take the time to understand their personal stories and aspirations. Students additionally perceived a need for having had more information and exposure to potential college and career pathways at earlier ages. Many believed



they may have pursued a different path in high school, taken different classes, or worked harder in their classes if they had known what would later be required to support their college aspirations.

Students described **several barriers that influenced their current college intentions** and plans for the future, including limited opportunities due to documentation status, negative stereotypes directed at lower-income schools and neighborhoods, and family financial difficulties. Students and families were often faced with weighing the benefits of the various types of higher education versus the cost of attendance without concrete information on how they could overcome financial barriers. Students also received conflicting messages from parents, teachers, counselors, and peers about whether community college or a four-year college or university was the best fit after high school. Irrespective of their current achievement levels or career goals, college-aspiring Latino students were often told that community college was the preferred first step.

Many students perceived that their generation of Latino youth is **more optimistic and empowered** than prior generations to overcome such barriers. They believed they had more opportunities available to them due to an increased emphasis on Latino college access, more Latino role models that have succeeded before them, and immigration policies that offered a pathway to college attendance for childhood arrivals. It should be noted, however, that the students' perspectives were likely shaped by the historical timing of the study which occurred in the spring of 2015, in the midst of the primaries for the

2016 U.S. presidential election, in which immigration and immigration policies were featured prominently. Although the political rhetoric targeted at Mexican immigrants in Arizona and concerns about the impending election were often referenced by the students, many remained optimistic that their generation would challenge negative stereotypes and succeed in college at higher rates if they were given access and financial support to pursue their college goals.

**Based on what we learned, we offer the following recommendations:**

1. Leverage families' positive influence to promote college-going and success.
2. Educate the whole family about the importance and process of college preparation.
3. Support students who feel the pressure of family obligations that may thwart college aspirations.
4. Promote partnerships between families and schools from an early age.
5. Support college-readiness programs and provide access at earlier ages.
6. Support teachers and counselors in the important role they play in the lives of their students.
7. Empower more Latino millennials to overcome barriers and continue their upward movement in higher education.

## INTRODUCTION

U.S. Latinos have shown tremendous progress in educational attainment in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center, the high school dropout rate among Latinos has declined to a new low of 12 percent, down from 32 percent in 2000. Also according to the Pew Research Center, 35 percent of Latinos aged 18 to 24 years were enrolled in a two- or four-year college in 2014, up from 22 percent in 1993. Despite this progress, Latinos still trail other groups in their completion of a college degree, particularly four-year degrees. Census estimates in 2015 show that among Latinos or Hispanics aged 25 to 34 years, only 15 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 36 percent of Non-Hispanic whites, 22.5 percent of blacks and 53.9 percent of Asians.

Several factors likely account for these gaps in college degree attainment. Many Latino students face significant financial barriers to college attendance and completion. Students from low-income and minority backgrounds are also more likely to attend high schools with insufficient college-prep tracks, including insufficient access to information on steps needed to gain admission, scholarships, and financial aid. Potential first-generation college students are especially disadvantaged because they and their parents may be unaware that these resources are needed. As a result, many Latino students are significantly behind academically by the time they realize what is required to compete for college admission and scholarships. According to a recent survey conducted by Helios Education Foundation and researchers at Arizona State University, the average ACT composite score among Arizona Latinos was 16.6, with nearly 60 percent scoring in the bottom quartile, well below the standards set by ACT for college and career readiness. Further, Latinos are less likely than other groups to enroll in a four-year (as opposed to a two-year) college, attend an academically selective college, or enroll in college full time. Nearly half of all Latinos who go to college attend a public two-year college, or community college, the highest rate of any race or ethnicity.

To advance our understanding of the multiple forces accounting for disparities between Latinos and other groups in college degree attainment, we conducted a qualitative focus group study of Arizona Latino students in their junior year of high school. In contrast to quantitative survey research, which helps identify broad population trends, we aimed to learn about the students' experiences

from their own words. Our goal was to understand students' interests and motivations to pursue a college degree, as well as what factors are more or less likely to influence their decision-making process at this critical stage. With this, we hoped to identify untapped resources to further boost college-going and success among future college-age Arizona students.

## Study Methods: Who, What, When, and How?

### School and participant selection

We first surveyed all students in their junior year from five high schools across the state of Arizona in three geographic areas: the greater Phoenix metropolitan area, the greater Tucson metropolitan area, and Yuma. Schools were selected based on the percentage of Latino youth attending the school (> 70 percent Latino) and to represent schools with varying historical college-attendance rates. All juniors in the schools were asked to complete a five-minute survey about their plans after high school. All students who had a GPA of at least 2.0 and self-identified as Latino were eligible for the study. Students were stratified into three clusters based on survey responses regarding their likelihood of attending college and were then randomly selected within each cluster for focus group participation. The three focus groups met simultaneously for one hour during a chosen school day at each high school (15 total groups). Students were compensated for their participation and were asked to keep the discussion confidential.

### Participants

In total 2,129 Latino students completed the survey (47 percent male). Fourteen percent of survey sample respondents were first-generation immigrants<sup>1</sup>, and 24 percent reported they would be the first in their families to attend college. Respondents' mean GPA was 2.82 (SD\* = .59). Across the five high schools, 139 students participated in the focus groups (51 percent male). Of these, 21 percent were first-generation immigrants, 50 percent were second generation, and 29 percent were third generation or greater. Twenty-four percent reported they would be the first in their families to attend college. The mean GPA of focus group participants was 3.05 (SD = .50).

### Focus group methods

Each focus group met for one hour. Students were asked semi-structured questions, and discussion was guided by the group leader. Questions included, for example,

<sup>1</sup>We use language commonly adopted by demographers to describe immigration patterns. Throughout this brief we refer to individuals who were born in another country and who immigrated to the United States as first-generation immigrants (and subsequent generations in similar ways, e.g., second-generation immigrants).

\*SD stands for standard deviation which is defined as the quantity calculated to indicate the extent of deviation for a group as a whole. In other words, standard deviation indicates the range of the data.



“Imagine yourself in the future: What do you hope to be doing?” and “Who or what has influenced your plans for the future?” Group leaders engaged students in conversations about the roles of their families, peer groups, schools, communities, and culture in their planning and decision-making for the future. Discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using standard qualitative data-analysis techniques.

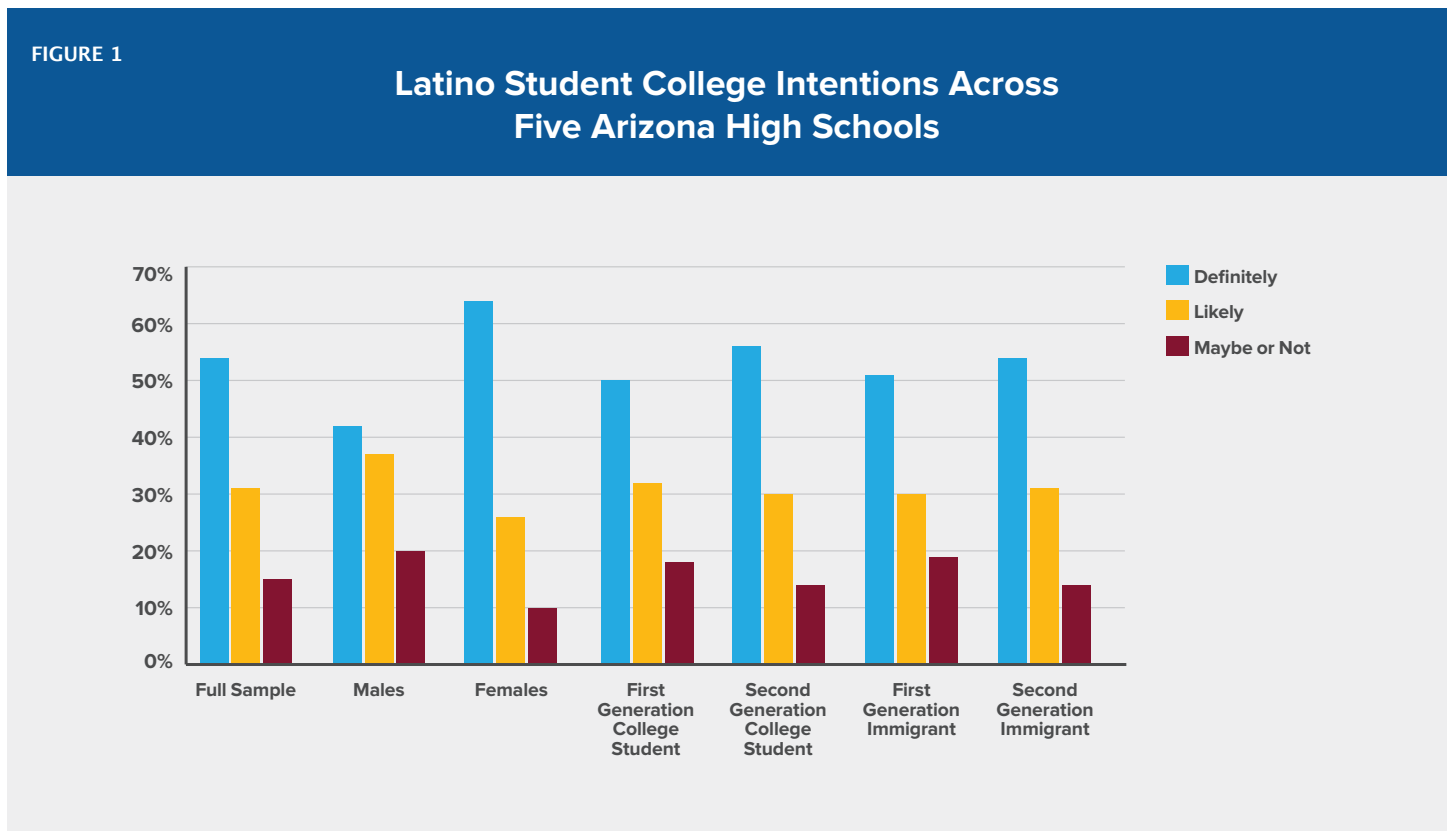
### College Intentions

In our survey of all Latino high school juniors in the five sample schools, we asked survey respondents to report on their intentions to engage in higher education. The options for response were: definitely attending, a high likelihood of attending, or undecided or not attending. Eighty-five percent reported they were definitely attending or had a high likelihood of attending. This number, which is substantially higher than current enrollment levels, exemplifies the gap often seen between college aspirations and college enrollment. It may also reflect a growing trend for more Latino students to consider

college as a desired goal for their future. National studies show that Latino/Hispanic college enrollment growth accounted for nearly 74 percent of all growth in college student enrollment from 2010 to 2011 (Fry, 2011).

To identify trends in different subgroups, we assessed whether differences existed by gender, immigrant generation status, or being the first in the family to attend college.

As shown in Figure 1, females were more likely than males to report they were definitely attending or had a high likelihood of attending college. This aligns with national trends in college attendance and persistence across all racial/ethnic groups (National Center on Education Statistics, 2015). Students who would be the first in their family to attend college were less likely to endorse that they were “definitely” going to attend college and more likely to endorse that they might be attending college or were not planning on attending. There were few differences among students according to their immigrant generational status.



## Sources of Influence for Latino Students

A key question asked of focus group participants was who or what helped them make decisions about their paths after high school. We coded whether the students responded with family members (parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, cousins, or grandparents), school personnel (teachers, principals, guidance counselors, or coaches), peers (friends, classmates, or romantic partners) or community members (mentors, leaders from the community, older neighbors, or bosses). Figure 2 shows the frequency with which these sources of influence were mentioned in the focus groups.

### Family: The Number One Influence

Family plays a central role in Latino students' plans for the future, including their decisions regarding higher education. As seen in Figure 3, we found that parents were most commonly discussed as the primary source of family influence.

## HOW FAMILIES INFLUENCE COLLEGE-GOING PATHWAYS

Students discussed many ways that family members influenced their college aspirations and planning, including concrete guidance from family members that had previously attended college, emotional support and encouragement that were integrated into students' daily lives, and family cultural practices that motivated students to succeed for the sake of their family, community, and cultural group.

### 1 Families provide educational capital for college access and success.

When parents, siblings, cousins, or other family members have attended college, they can provide concrete information about the steps needed to prepare for and succeed in a college-going track. This academic know-how influences which educational opportunities students pursue prior to and during high school and their understanding of what is required to compete for admissions and scholarships.

FIGURE 2

## Sources of Influence Mentioned Across All Focus Groups

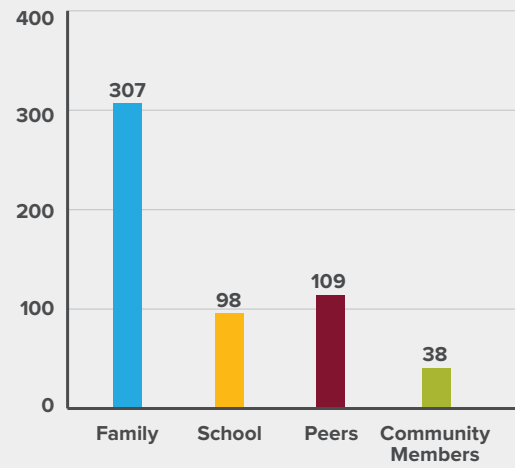
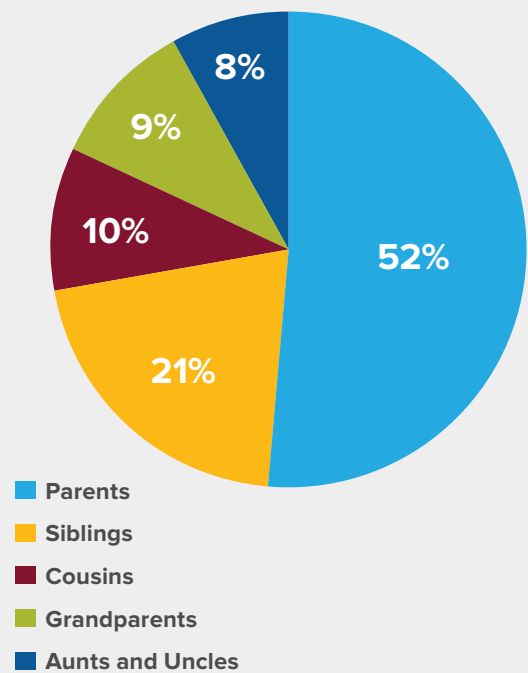
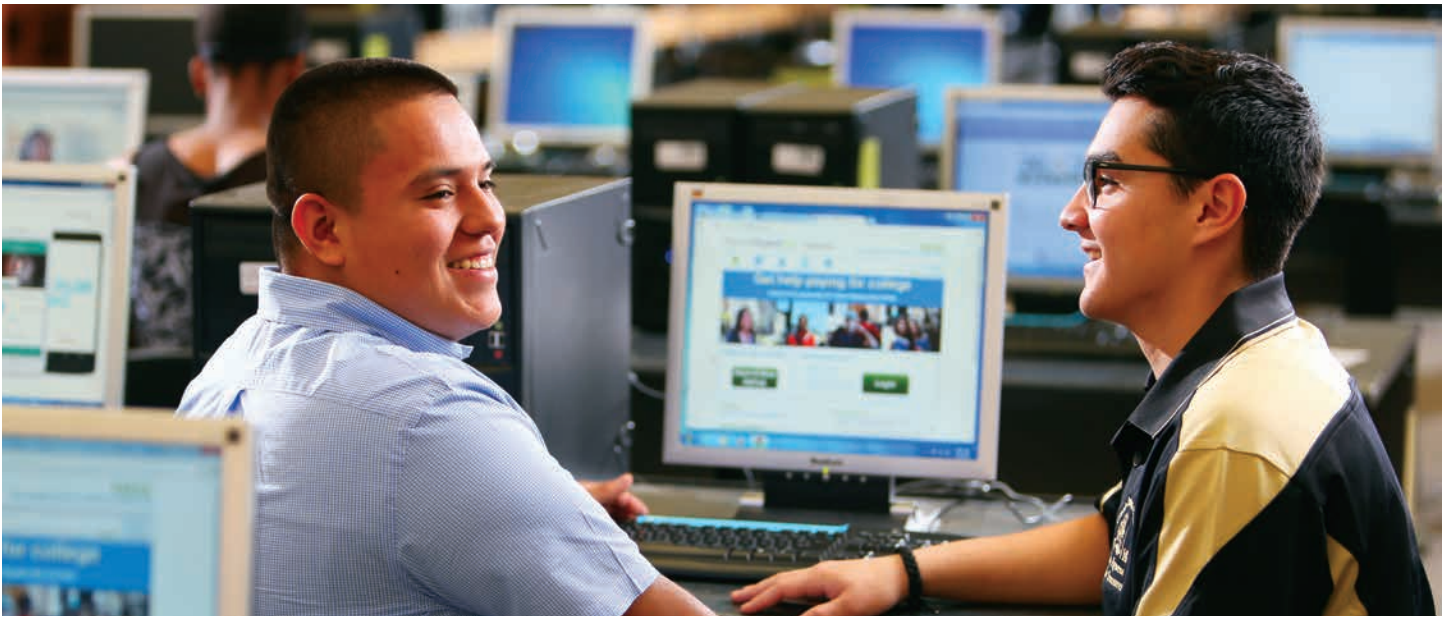


FIGURE 3

## Sources of Influence Within Families





Such a family member also provides a much-needed role model, enabling the student to envision a college-going track as a viable path for their own future. Models of success also serve as important motivators for planning and persistence. When students come from families or neighborhoods where no one has completed a college degree, they are more likely to doubt their college worthiness and are less likely to persist in facing the inevitable challenges along the way.

*“Years ago I was very scared of my future. I didn’t have any idea what was I going to do. But now I have three cousins who are attending U of A and ever since I have looked up to them and they’ve given me an example . . . so that’s what made me think that the future’s not scary.”*

(FEMALE)

Students without family role models also face difficulties in finding the emotional and academic support they need. According to a recent Pell Institute Report, only 11 percent of low-income students who are the first in their families to attend college will have a college degree within six years of enrolling in school.

*“I decided I want to go to ASU. My sister is currently in her second year of university, and I’m also in the AVID program. We visited ASU twice as a class, so I know a little more about the school after the field trips, and my sister helps me research the school and if my career choice is good in that school.”*

(FEMALE)

*“It’s hard to express yourself to your family. When they tell you ‘oh do better than me’, what do they mean? It’s kind of hard. I know I want to have an education. I know what they mean by education, but you have to talk to people who actually know. It’s especially hard if your family has never been to a college or university.”*

(FEMALE)



## 2 Family “Funds of Knowledge” also play an important role.

Although students who would be the first in their families to attend college may struggle to obtain needed information, the family still provides a strong motivating influence.

“Funds of Knowledge” are essential cultural practices and inherited knowledge embedded in the daily routines of families (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992).

Students in the focus groups offered examples of daily practices, advice, and encouragement they received from family members — especially parents — that influenced their decisions to pursue college enrollment and take advantage of opportunities to prepare for a college track. The more common examples included:

- Frequent discussions about future careers and steps needed to achieve them.
- Parents and students actively seeking enrichment opportunities, courses, and choices that would support college aspirations.
- Parents encouraging students to seek resources outside the family for additional information and guidance.
- Parents communicating high expectations through daily questions about schoolwork, praising student achievements, and holding students accountable for school success.

“My grandma and my aunt, they helped me with my career goals. Before I didn’t really have a set plan. I just wanted to finish school. And they helped me get more options out, helped me do more research on my career.”

(MALE)

“Well, it’s always been, “After high school, I go to college.” I don’t wanna work at a fast food restaurant or something, and I don’t want that for my future. My parents always encouraged me . . . and they remind me every day, ‘You have to go to college. You have to.’”

(FEMALE)

“I talk to my mom a lot about it. She constantly talks about it too, about the future and what I have to do and the steps to take.”

(FEMALE)

### 3 For many Latino students, a college degree is a family obligation.

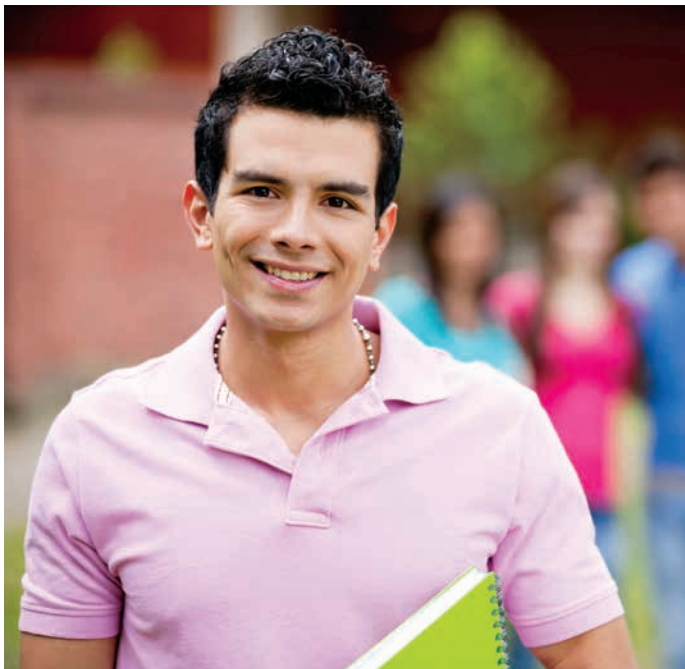
The desire to achieve a better life for the sake of the family was the most consistent and powerful message we heard from the students across schools.

Students wanted to make their families proud, to achieve success to help their families in the future, and to pay them back for what they had sacrificed.

A strong sense of obligation to the family was widely expressed. Students' descriptions further illustrated how this value was socialized by family members who frequently used their own experiences and struggles to motivate their children (e.g., "don't make the same mistakes," "don't struggle like we had to do," and "choose a better path").

A sense of pride and obligation also extended to the broader community, with many students reporting strong support within their schools and neighborhoods motivating them to succeed and give back.

However, family obligations can be double-edged, putting excessive pressure on some students, especially if they did not receive concrete guidance or financial support to realize their family's expectations. Some students also reported that family obligations held them back because of their need to work to help support the family.



“My dad made it to freshman year; my mom didn't. And so, ever since I started school, they were always pushing me to become more and get more successful than they did . . . And so they made more sacrifices for me, and stuff like that . . . Looking forward to things your parents didn't do and doing it for them.”  
(MALE)

“Well, they just — I don't know. They push me for it. They say that they'll be proud of me, that I'll make a difference, that my life will be so much better, and I'll be able to help them and myself out, and school — what they missed out, and they see what I'm doing, and they're really impressed, and it just makes me feel good, so I want to do it for them.”  
(FEMALE)

“There's a lot of pride where I'm from . . . if I ever do something big with my life, I'm going to give back to this community. I love this place.”  
(MALE)

“I feel like most parents expect for their child to be something better than what the parents ended up being. . . . But I don't think they understand that we can't just work all the time and not all of us can get straight A's and get so many scholarships or stuff like that. And then the families don't have a money plan or something for college, so then it just ends up turning into a mess, because there wasn't any real plan. It was just expectations.”  
(FEMALE)

## Family Influences – Key Takeaways

Family influences were the most often cited and seemingly most important motivators for the college-going participants in the focus groups. The path to college was perceived as more tangible if a prior family member had attended college. However, regardless of whether parents have attended college, they play an important role in helping students find the motivation, resources, and opportunities they need to prepare for and succeed in college.

The role of the family should, therefore, be leveraged in future efforts to improve Latino college-going and completion rates. This includes taking advantage of the family Funds of Knowledge and culturally linked pride that motivate students to reach high and persist in pursuing their goals.

These influences did not just enhance students' preparedness. They also motivated students to persist in pursuing their goals despite the barriers they encountered.

“My dad has been really influential in pushing me about going to school and succeeding. With him, he’s a painting contractor and he says that he’s going to probably work until the day he dies and he doesn’t want that life for me. He wants me to be better than that. And they have that expectation of, ‘You don’t want what I have; you want something better than I have,’ and they want you to strive for that betterness.”

(MALE)

## HOW SCHOOLS INFLUENCE COLLEGE-GOING PATHWAYS

Because many families lack social capital to promote college-going pathways, the school becomes a primary influence for many students.

Latino students identified many sources of concrete information and support from within the formal school setting, including school personnel and college preparatory programs and classes.

For first-generation, college-aspiring students, connecting with a teacher, counselor, or coach can be especially important. Counselors or teachers can provide a different type of guidance than parents can because of their better understanding of the concrete steps students need to take to gain acceptance to and succeed in college.

Students reported that the school-based sources of information and support came from counselors, teachers, and coaches, as well as more generally from college-focused courses, extracurricular and afterschool programs, and outreach programs.

Students also talked about the influence of culture or school environment on their decision-making. Several common themes emerged from these discussions that highlight key areas of strength that schools can build upon and barriers students commonly face within the formal school environment.

“I think that the teachers fill that gap that our parents cannot because they are actually in the education system, and they can help with the jobs and all that. My [goal is] early childhood education, I want to work with children, and if a class might help me, she gives me a recommendation.”

(FEMALE)

“I ask the counselors where do you think I can go? What’s better for me? And my parents are like, ‘I know you need to go. I don’t want you to stay here at home. If you think that’s better for you . . .’ they’re really open about it. They support me.”

(FEMALE)

“My French teacher is really strict, but there’s a reason why she’s strict. High school students think of teachers who are strict as all bad and stuff. They just wanna mess with us, and it’s actually the opposite. They just wanna help you, they want you to get ahead and be advanced, to know the experience that you’re gonna get in college or university. She doesn’t necessarily talk about college or university. She just sometimes throws out like a random thing on college or university.”

(FEMALE)

**4 Positive relationships with teachers and counselors can significantly impact the lives of students.**

Students reported feeling most supported when teachers and counselors were willing to listen and understand students' personal stories. Teachers' willingness to share their own experiences were also perceived as helpful, in addition to emphasizing college and college-going pathways across different subjects.

Students liked when teachers pushed and motivated them to do well, to get involved in the college application process, and to achieve their goals inside and outside of the classroom.

While positive and supportive themes surrounding teachers and counselors were the most common, some students reported not connecting with their teachers or counselors, or feeling as if their teachers or counselors did not understand their chosen pathway. For example, some students perceived that their counselors used a one-size-fits all approach and even dissuaded some students from pursuing their desired paths. Many students reported feeling discouraged when their ideas or plans for the future were not heard or supported.

According to the American School Counselor Association, Arizona ranked at the bottom of all states for having the highest number of students per school counselor in 2016, at 941-1 compared to the recommended 250-1. This, in conjunction with our findings, suggests that high school counselors may be taxed given the high ratios reported across Arizona. Counselors may not have opportunities to meet and provide guidance for all students based on limited time and resources.

“So my mom asked me one day and I told her and then she's like 'well if you wanna do two things they have to be kind of similar.' If say I do dance and then I do engineering, it's totally different and maybe the college doesn't offer both . . . And there was this counselor and I told him, and then he's like 'oh no you shouldn't do that' cause I was looking into acting and musical theater and stuff like that and he's like 'oh no don't do that, you're not gonna make it'. You should like become a teacher, if anything, if you wanna do that. And I'm just like . . . no.”

(FEMALE)

**5 College prep courses and college-readiness programs are important.**

Students reported that college-readiness programs (e.g., AVID and Aguila Youth Leadership Institute) best prepared them for college and future-related decision-making.

Other formal coursework such as advanced placement (AP), international baccalaureate (IB), and career-relevant classes helped students develop their interests and served to motivate them to succeed in higher education. In addition to courses, higher education-funded programs, including college-readiness websites and summer programs, were highlighted as key stepping stones to ensuring college readiness.

Students especially benefitted from peer mentoring and having role models who had succeeded in pursuing an aspired path. With peer mentoring, students reported benefiting from their peers both as resources (e.g., asking questions and receiving advice) and as sources of motivation and examples that individuals from their school or community could succeed in higher education.

“I was in AVID freshman and sophomore year, and it helped me so much. It just made me understand what I was getting myself into. It made me so prepared for everything. They sat down with us and told us these are the classes you need to take, you need to have this finished. It made me so organized. It got me prepared. But now junior year I had to leave that class because I need other classes. I hope I will get back in it senior year.”

(FEMALE)



## 6 Students perceived inequality in access to college programs and pathways.

A common theme across student responses was that access to school resources was not always equal. While some students attributed this to tracking within schools, others believed their schools as a whole were provided with fewer resources than those in neighboring communities.

A clear perception among students was that tracking leads to differential investment in students, whereby those who were in enrichment programs or advanced classes had the greatest access to counselors' time, information, and resources. Students reported that if their peers did not opt into programs early or if they were not placed in college readiness tracks, then they did not receive the same access that those considered high achieving did.

Many students reported that teachers did not try to motivate average or lower-performing students, that those students were encouraged to graduate from high school, but that little was done to motivate them beyond that.

Students in some schools believed that college-oriented programs were not valued and that this lack of college focus among students and staff discouraged those who were serious about pursuing higher education. Many students reported feeling frustrated that they were not offered as many Advanced Placement or honors classes as at other schools. Further, some students believed they were actually being counseled out of pursuing a college education due to their school or community norms.

“If you're not in AP or honors classes, and you're taking regular classes, you don't have to be dumb if you're just normal, they won't give you guidance or anything in those classes. I have friends that are in regular classes and they don't know anything that I talk about from AP and honors and college and stuff.”

(FEMALE)

“[talking about students in more affluent schools] . . . I think those people have more opportunities and chances than we do, because of the money that they have and the environment that they're around.”

(FEMALE)

“The kids that are struggling, they don't get the same opportunities. Because you have a 3.0 GPA, you can't get into ACE and such. Even though they really do need that help, they can't get into certain programs because they struggle with grades. The kids that are struggling are the ones that need more attention than the ones that are exceeding and excelling. They should know and be informed about it. . . . They should go to the regular on-level kids and the kids that are struggling to help push them. This program could benefit you this way. They don't do that.”

(FEMALE)



## 7 High school is too late to get started.

A recurrent theme among participants across several schools was that many students believed they were behind in college preparation. At the time these focus groups were conducted, in the second semester of the junior year, many students were just beginning to consider whether college was an option they would pursue.

Students expressed a desire for having had more information and exposure to potential college and career pathways earlier. Some believed they may have pursued a different path in high school, taken different classes or worked harder in their classes if they had known what would be required not just to get into college but also to succeed in college. Further, many thought that college preparation courses should be required for all students from an early age so that everyone could have an equal opportunity, regardless of their previous knowledge about college or their academic history. Importantly, they highlighted the need for information to be disseminated to parents and families early on so that they can have longer to prepare financially for college.

“A lot of the college programs, you have to sign up for it, you have to write an essay for it. And we then think, oh, I have to write an essay, I’m not gonna do it, just to get accepted into a class about college. I feel like in elementary school or even in high school they should have a class that teaches you about college. Because these programs are voluntary; Be a Leader, Hispanic Mother Daughter Program, Achieving a College Education program — it’s all voluntary.”

(FEMALE)

### School Influences – Key Takeaways

Students perceived the school environment to be an integral source of support and information in preparation for college. Significantly, schools complement the support, information, and motivation students receive from families due to their closer connections to higher education institutions, more tangible resources, and more concrete information.

However, it is also clear that reforms are needed both within and across schools for students from diverse backgrounds and communities to succeed. Further, there is a need to allow access to information about higher education across all classrooms within schools and for students to be able to opt into the college-going path at different stages.

### OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

Many students described significant barriers to college pathways, including limited opportunities due to documentation status, negative stereotypes directed at lower income schools and neighborhoods, and family financial difficulties.

## 8 Students must weigh economic costs and benefits of college attendance and their choice of school.

Most students understood college to be a path to future social and economic mobility. However, they also acknowledged economic barriers to college attendance, through statements like “college is too expensive” and that it would not be possible without scholarships or other forms of financial aid.

In a 2014 National Journal poll, 66 percent of Latinos who got a job or entered the military directly after high school cited the need to help support their family as a reason for not enrolling in college, compared with 39 percent of non-Latino whites.

Many students in this study identified the need or desire to work to be able to contribute to the costs of education or to help their families. Students also reported that economic constraints were often not acknowledged or addressed by high school or college counselors.

Students and families were often faced with weighing the benefits of the various types of higher education versus the cost of attendance without concrete information on how they could overcome financial barriers. Students also reported receiving conflicting messages from parents, teachers, counselors, and peers about whether community college or a four-year college or university was the best fit after high school.



**Students and families must weigh the benefits of different types of higher education vs. cost. Students discussed common (mis)perceptions about college and career choice:**

- Community college is always more affordable and the logical first step.
- The desired pathway is to go to community college first to “figure out what you want to do.”
- Bachelor’s granting institutions are a “waste of money.”
- Students should avoid careers that are too difficult or do not offer clear and immediate earning potential.

“They make it seem as a place where it’s just, ‘It’s better for you. You continue learning and doing more stuff. They never bring up that it’s expensive. When you see college commercials, it’s all about [the fun things like concerts and sporting events]. But they never really talk about how, how, how you’re gonna pay for it.”

(FEMALE)

“You have to. You have to get a job. There’s no way out of it. You’re gonna have to get a job, so . . . it’s gonna be hard.”

(MALE)

“I’ve been talking to my cousin and he lives in Phoenix. He’s in high school. And he says he wants to go to community college, get his basic credits there, and then go to ASU, U of A, or whatever university he wants to get the actual major degree that he wants. And that’s what I’m thinking of doing, too. Going to a community college then transferring over.”

(MALE)

“It’s also like, because I want to be a lawyer, and then everyone is, my family, is like, “No, don’t do that. That’s too hard. That’s too long.”

(FEMALE)

“Like my mom was telling me – cause my mom, so far, is the only one who’s been in college – I was planning on going to a university and she was telling me don’t do university because you have to pay for your dorms, you have to pay for your books, and so much more you have to pay. And at a community college, they give you that one-on-one. You’re not going to college parties and everything but that’s not what you’re going to college for. So she was telling me go to a community college, focus on school, have a job on the side, and just build from there.”

(FEMALE)

“I’ve been shut down on a couple of career ideas because every time that I — like I’ll say to someone, to parents or to students — they always say that there’s not a lot of money in that. Stuff like that. And I’m always like, “Well, I mean, I’ll be happy doing it. So I don’t care.”

(MALE)

**9** Students perceived a generational shift in the expectations and optimism of Latino youth.

Many students described what they perceive as a generational shift in what it means to be Latino in the U.S. They described Latino millennials as being more optimistic and empowered than prior generations were when facing barriers and negative stereotypes. Many also recognized their greater access to Latino role models counteracting negative cultural, social, and gender stereotypes. As a result, they feel highly motivated and better equipped to overcome barriers in pursuit of their college aspirations.

However, many of the first-generation, immigrant students were relying on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) policy, issued by Executive Order in 2012 by President Obama, to support their college aspirations and were well aware that future political events might threaten the opportunities that this immigration policy had created.

“You could actually look at it as we’re trying to better ourselves as a community. We’re trying to better ourselves as a race. And get past that stereotype everybody thinks of us, and strive higher than what they think of us . . .”  
(MALE)

“We’ve been told basically all our lives that we’re not as good as them . . . some people fool around and some people will take it serious because . . . they want to prove that they’re something . . .”  
(FEMALE)

“My parents say it’s always good that you are Mexican and you speak fluent Spanish and you learn English, so like universities really pay attention to that . . . your background. And jobs, it’s really good to be bilingual.”  
(FEMALE)

“The DACA program . . . keeps immigrant children here to study. And can help us stay to study and get jobs . . . it’s a process. You have to fill a lot of papers. You have to pay a fee of like \$1,500, I think. And it’s only for two years. After two years, you have to renew it again and re-pay . . .”  
(FEMALE)

“I have friends who are all in the same position as me, from Mexico, immigrants and stuff. I’m the one pushing them because I’m trying hard and I see what they’re going through and I’m like, ‘No, you need to make sure you’re doing this.’ Because you want to have a good life. I’m helping them out but they’re helping me out at the same time because we know the struggle of everything that’s going on about immigration.”  
(FEMALE)

### Overcoming Barriers – Key Takeaways

Students acknowledged numerous barriers to college attendance, with a majority expressing concerns about their ability to finance college and the need to carefully consider the costs of higher education in their decisions about whether, when and where to enroll. Community college was perceived as the necessary and preferred option by many. Other cultural barriers included limited opportunities due to immigration status and negative stereotypes directed at Latino students.

However, many students expressed a sense of optimism that opportunities had expanded to support Latino student success in higher education. There is a need to sustain and accelerate this momentum through policies, programs, and institutions that support Latino college access and degree completion.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations were drawn from this work as well as existing research on improving Latino student success.

**1. Leverage families' positive influence to promote college-going.** Latino family values often promote college-going, but families also need concrete strategies to help turn student motivations into action. Families should be included in efforts to support students at all stages on the path to a college degree. They should be encouraged to continue, or start, to make higher education and college a part of the daily dialogue.

**2. Educate the whole family about the importance and process of college preparation.** Families need concrete information about the benefits of four-year colleges, financial aid, and the application process, and an understanding of technological and labor-market changes that favor four-year college degrees and non-traditional career choices.

**3. Support students who feel the pressure of family obligations that may thwart college aspirations.** Many students feel a greater pressure to succeed, or on the opposite side, not attend college due to obligations, financial or otherwise, to the family. Families and schools should work to identify those who may be struggling and provide them with resources and multiple pathways to success that fit the students' goals and family needs.

**4. Promote partnerships between families and schools from an early age.** Meaningful family engagement and family-school collaborations should begin as early as kindergarten. By doing so, families will feel more empowered to seek resources and information earlier on to help promote college attainment.

**5. Support college-readiness programs and provide access at earlier ages.** Provide access to appropriate college-readiness programs for students at all ability levels, not just for high-achieving students. Mobilize the influence of peer mentors from underrepresented communities to aid in delivering these programs. These students are often motivated to give back and are able to serve as real-life examples that college is possible for students like them.

**6. Support teachers and counselors in the important roles they play in the lives of their students.** Provide training, tools, improved teacher/counselor-student ratios, and incentives for teachers and counselors to develop strong connections and a true understanding of their students' interests and needs.

**7. Empower Latino students to overcome barriers and negative stereotypes and continue their upward movement in higher education.** Families, educators, and policy-makers should capitalize on the recent gains in college attendance and the growing perception that opportunities are opening for U.S. Latinos. Useful strategies include promoting youth civic engagement, encouraging Latino youth to embrace their cultural heritage and its resilience, using community and family role models to motivate students to overcome barriers, and continued support of immigration and education policies that provide access to college for all students educated in the U.S.

### Participating Schools and School Districts

- César Chávez High School, Phoenix Union High School District
- Cholla High Magnet School, Tucson Unified School District
- Trevor G. Browne High School, Phoenix Union High School District
- Tucson High Magnet School, Tucson Unified School District
- San Luis High School, Yuma Union High School District

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