



TRANSITION TO COLLEGE & CAREER AMONG INDIANA LATINX YOUTH. PERCEPTIONS FROM PARENTS, STUDENTS, AND EDUCATORS.

Final Research Report¹

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PRESENTATION

In Indiana, and particularly in Indianapolis, studies related to the factors that affect Latinx educational goals are scarce, and information available through past research does not reflect the reality of the new Latino diaspora. In September of 2019, researchers of the IUPUI Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and Eskenazi Health collaborated with the Indiana Latino Expo (ILE), a non-profit statewide organization, to study challenges and opportunities for Latinx high school students' transition to college. The value of this collaboration was high on ILE's radar, compelling their participation in identifying the problem to be investigated and co-creating the data collection tools. ILE also sought financial support to fund the cost of grocery store gift cards for study participants.

The research team scheduled meetings with members of the community. A series of focus groups and interviews targeting IPS Latinx families, students, and education service providers were conducted. Through this dialogue, we were able to identify the main obstacles and hazards that hinder Latinx students' transition to college and a career.

The results of this study will provide Indianapolis organizations, corporations, institutions, and individuals with information that they can use to think collectively about programs and services to support Latinx families and their children to navigate their way to higher education and career opportunities¹.

¹ This research was approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board (IRB-IUB) and the IPS Research, Evaluation and Assessment Department.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Indianapolis, Latinos are the second-largest minority population in public schools after African American students. The Indiana Department of Education reports 134,319 Latino students enrolled in Indiana schools in 2020. The proportion of Latinx students grew from 6.6% in 2008 to 12.8% in 2020 (Indiana Department of Education [IDOE], 2020). Despite this growth, in 2018, the college-going trend within one year of high school graduation among Latinos was 51 percent, the lowest of all ethnic/racial groups (Indiana Commission for Higher Education [ICHE], 2020). In 2018, the average freshman GPA among Latinos (2.5) was lower than the GPA among White (2.7) and Asian (3.0) students (ICHE, 2020). However, there is a significant gap in the literature about Latinx students' struggles to access post-secondary options. This exploratory research intends to address this gap. The study uses students, parents, and high school teachers' voices to identify barriers, challenges, and opportunities that Latinx high school students in Indianapolis Public Schools find in their transition to meaningful post-secondary options.

Main findings:

1. Latinx high school students and their families, especially newcomers, lack the knowledge, means, and resources to successfully cope with the financial, legal, and cultural barriers to transition into college and career opportunities successfully.
2. Students' families value college-going and emphasize the importance of college attendance.

3. Students in our sample, especially newcomers (9th and 10th grades), have less knowledge about college and career opportunities than expected at their grade level.
4. Newcomer parents do not have the tools for guiding their students through the college-going process. They do not know the American education system, understand the different pathways their children can take in high school, or have systematic and organized information about the courses and academic standards needed to fulfill admission requirements.
5. Parents and students expressed that financial barriers were the main obstacle to attend college. Students talked about their responsibility to financially contribute to their families' economy.
6. Very few students mentioned their intentions to apply for scholarships or financial aid. Some of them see financial aid as impossible due to their legal status.
7. While parents have big aspirations for their children and perceive financial issues as the main obstacle, students made a more realistic assessment of their possibilities. Students' aspirations and expectations are subject to how they perceive barriers in their legal status in the U.S., English proficiency, academic readiness, and financial challenges.
8. Students gain college and career knowledge at school, with friends, internet search, and family friends who have lived the college experience. However, not all students "activate" school and community resources to take advantage of available options for several reasons.

Main recommendations:

1. **Start Early:** Provide earlier opportunities for students to start practicing skills that will lead them to be more connected to college opportunities. Newcomers need more intensive preparation as they do not have the school experience that other children who started early in American schools have.
2. **Promote access and use of college and career resources:** The number of college resources and school staff that Latino students use is positively associated with the number of college applications students submit.
3. **Promote school college-going messaging:** The way the college-going culture is exercised in the school; the consistency, robustness, and continuity of the message are essential to strengthening students' understanding of what they need to do for their future and how they act.
4. **Mental Health Support:** Latinx students need additional support to increase their resilience and feeling of being accepted and welcomed, especially in big schools.
5. **Continue providing affordable a Second Language (ESL) support after high school:** Post-secondary institutions can create affordable ESL programs for non-English speakers to continue improving their English skills after high school.
6. **Educate Parents:** Develop programming to support parents' understanding of the milestones of future college students' journeys. This includes reaching out to families and work with them through several sessions to promote awareness and support action.
7. **Mentoring by college students:** College students can provide students with insights about the college process and career opportunities. Promote

opportunities for professionals and college students coming to meet with students and help develop college-going capital.

8. **Basic financial skills are essential:** Newcomers and many Latinx students usually lack the necessary financial knowledge about saving and lending money for education, which becomes overwhelming for them. Providing this kind of knowledge with culturally appropriate tools and practical examples that talk to their reality is vitally important.
9. **Support to undocumented students:** Provide systematic support to undocumented students and connect them with community resources.
10. **Keep school teachers and staff informed:** Not all teachers in contact with Latinx students know of available college and career resources. The more teachers know, the easier it will be for them to refer students to the right sources.

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study used convenient sampling. Participants were recruited using the following criteria: 1) students, Latinx, 9 to 12th grades, 2) parents or guardians of Latinx students, 9 to 12th grades, 3) teachers assisting Latinx students with their college and career goals or working with Latinx students 9 to 12th grades or their parents. The schools where participants were recruited have the highest proportion of Latinx students in Indianapolis (Indiana State Department of Education). Eighteen Indianapolis Public School District Latinx students, six parents, and four teachers from three Indianapolis public schools participated (Table 1).

Participating parents -three male and three female- were newcomers who have been in the United States for 1 to 2 years. The age of the parents ranged from 24 to 55 years of age. None of the parents had a college education².

Table 1

Participating population

Schools	Grades				Gender		Teachers	Parents
	9th	10th	11th	12th	Female	Male		
A	0	0	1	2	3	0	2	0
B	0	1	1	1	1	2	1	0
C	9	3	0	0	7	5	1	6
Total	9	4	2	3	11	7	4	6

Note. Latino students in the Newcomer Program (school C) stay only one year in the program until they transition to a regular IPS school.

The four participating teachers in the three selected schools were: 1 college and career coordinator and English as a second language (ESL) teacher; 1 Latino ESL

² The study initially included four IPS schools. Research interactions that were supposed to occur in March 2020 with students, parents and teachers in the fourth school were interrupted because of COVID-19. Meetings with parents in schools A and B were not possible either.

teacher; 1 ESL teacher (non-Hispanic); and 1 Latino teacher and parent-school coordinator. Teachers have between 6 and 10 years of experience working with Latino students at elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Data Collection

Data were collected at the schools, using focus groups with parents and students and semi-structured interviews with teachers. A teacher remained in the room during the focus groups with parents and students. Two or three researchers were present during research interactions; one of them was the note taker. Interview and focus group protocols used similar questions, which allowed data triangulation. Data collected during interactions included in all cases: educational and career expectations/aspirations of students after high school, strategies in place to meet expectations, available/used information and resources for students and parents on college and career readiness, main barriers and challenges to transition to college and career, and needed support. After each research interaction, teachers, parents, and students received a \$20 gift card.

Data Analysis

Data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011). Researchers conducted individual readings of the transcripts and identified themes in the data for parents, teachers, and students separately. Researchers met collectively to conduct a thematic analysis of the data and compare the data from teachers and parents/guardians identifying three main themes: aspirations and expectations, perception about barriers, and availability, and use of college and career resources. We organized findings based on the three themes found in the data.

FINDINGS

College and Career Aspirations

Going to college and earning a degree is enthusiastically embraced, especially by newcomer students and parents. In the three schools, students expressed their post-secondary choices (Table 2). STEM careers like architecture and civil and automotive engineering were primarily boy's preference (4 out of 6), while only 3 out of 11 girls preferred STEM careers.

Some students do not see themselves getting a college degree. Parents' expectations play a significant role in how students visualize college. A few students shared that their parents expected them to financially support their family, work in the family business, or go into the military.

Table 2

Student career choices

Boys	Girls
Architect; civil engineer; construction (business owner); math instructor; military career; a police officer	Architect; attorney; automotive; baker or pastry maker; business owner; chef; engineer; graphic design; school teacher; physical therapist; physician; police officer; psychologist.

While parents have big aspirations for their children and perceive financial issues as the main obstacle, students made a more realistic assessment of their possibilities. For students, their aspirations and expectations are subject to how they perceive barriers in their legal status in the U.S., their academic readiness, and financial challenges.

The Role of Family Values in Shaping College Aspirations

- Parents want their students to attend college and acknowledge their influence on their children's decisions to go to college. Parents provide emotional support and encouragement and are eager to support their children financially. They provide *consejos* (advice) to their students, drawing from their insights to encourage and motivate their youth to continue to strive for better educational and career-related opportunities (Auerbach, 2004).
- However, some families experience significant hurdles that shape their aspirations. Their journey through migration and their motivations to migrate to the U.S. can influence how they transmit the college-going message to their children.
- Students in our sample, especially newcomers, have minimal “**college-going capital;**” the knowledge about college that students gain through the “network ties with high school and college staff and with their families, communities, and peers” (Leibbrandt, 2016). College-going capital affects students’ chances of being exposed, successfully applying, and enrolling in post-secondary educational options.
- For students, financially caring for their families (locally and in their home countries) puts on hold any idea of going directly from high school to post-secondary education. This situation seems to be more pressing among first-generation students coming from the countryside or rural areas.

Barriers to accessing beneficial post-secondary opportunities

Because of the multiple barriers they find, Latinx students struggle to get from senior in high school or graduate from high school to getting started at college. Some of the obstacles mentioned are the following:

Lack of College Preparation at Home

- Newcomer parents do not have the tools for guiding their students through the college-going process. They do not know the American education system, understand the different pathways their children can take in high school, or have systematic and organized information about the courses and academic standards needed to fulfill admission requirements.
- Parents find that schools provide the academic preparation their children need and focus their education at home on providing “life readiness” (Serrata, 2017). Parents make sure that their children acquire life skills and values like discipline, hard work, and responsibility, leaving schools responsible for preparing students for college and career.

Financial Barriers

- Parents identified financial challenges as the main barrier. Even for parents who think that their children are doing well academically, they foresee the financial struggles their children will have to endure to pursue a college education.
- Similarly, students expressed that the lack of money could be an obstacle and talked about their responsibility to financially contribute to their families' economy here in the U.S. and back in their countries.

- Very few students mentioned their intentions to apply for scholarships or financial aid. Some of them see financial aid as impossible due to their legal status. When we discussed loans, students said they wanted to avoid borrowing money, citing the difficulties of paying back
- College dreams may be even more elusive for male Latinos since they may be more interested in working than performing well at school.
- Some students expressed that their parents sometimes expect them to study in two-year institutions to complete their education earlier, instead of getting a four-year degree. Enrolling in a 2-year community college as a pathway to a 4-year college was never mentioned.
- Newcomer students show great confidence and determination to go to college but have no plan or strategy to fulfill their aspirations.

Academic Barriers

- Students at the newcomer program tend to drop out when transitioned into regular high schools where the student-teacher ratios are higher, and they do not find the necessary support they need.
- Teachers find that Latinx students have academic gaps that may have originated in previous years, some in their home countries.
- Students expressed concern that their academic preparation could hinder their college aspirations. Several senior high school students said that they were not yet ready for college.
- Teachers mentioned that sometimes students do not trust their academic skills, which may become a significant obstacle to higher education.

Language Barriers

- Not having advanced English skills is not perceived by students as a significant obstacle to completing high school. However, students acknowledged that English proficiency levels could affect their possibilities of successfully pursuing effective options beyond high school.
- Students in the newcomer program did not mention their English skills as an issue; nonetheless, teachers said poor English skills were among the factors influencing students' dropouts when transferred to a regular high school.
- Low English competency levels were sometimes associated with poor Spanish writing and reading skills. Teachers mentioned that some students enter the educational system, not reading or writing well in Spanish, so teachers also have to work on increasing their literacy levels.

Acculturative Stress

- Newcomer students tend to feel anxiety when exposed to situations that may be common for their American classmates. Even taking the bus to move around the city can bring insecurity because of language and cultural barriers or legal status. Acculturation does not occur early after immigration, and language difficulties add obstacles to adjusting to a new environment.

Legal Barriers

- Being undocumented is perceived by families as a significant barrier to pursuing post-secondary options. Families with no legal authorization to be in the U.S. find obstacles to get financial aid for education. Besides, in Indiana,

undocumented students have to pay out-of-state college tuition rates, regardless of how long they have lived in the state.

- There is noticeable disinformation about legal barriers among newcomer families, and students' legal status influences their aspirations and expectations to continue their education beyond high school.

Access to College and Career Resources through School

Table 3 on the next page below summarizes the resources, programs, and activities mentioned during research interactions.

- Of the three participating schools, schools A and B regularly offer post-secondary readiness programs and resources. The Newcomer program's focus is to increase students' English language proficiency. Schools A and B have Future Centers, JROTC programs, and High Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways that provide learners with the knowledge and skills they need to prepare for college and career. The college and career Academies offered in schools A and B lead to an industry-recognized certification, dual credit, or opportunities to participate in work-based learning experiences throughout grades 9-12.
- Students in schools A and B described resources limited to local scholarship programs, university-led workshops, and the Future Centers. They reported interactions with surrounding businesses and industries within the community through internships, information, or connection to job opportunities through their schools.

Table 3

College and career resources identified by participants

Resources	Sources of information
School-based resources: Counseling services Future Centers Parent-teacher conferences Texting service Community-based resources: College prep workshops/events Internships Scholarship programs	Peers Family (parents, siblings)/Extended family College Representatives School staff: College readiness coach, Family, and Community Engagement (FACE) liaisons, teachers, counselors, bilingual staff Army/Military/ Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) instructors Local industries and businesses Printed material/Internet Indiana Department of State College and Career Navigation Resources

- Parents at the newcomer program showed little knowledge about resources available to their students or themselves. Parents sometimes receive the information and do not act on it because they still feel that they need more information. Together with more information, they expressed to need more accompaniment in the process.

Use of College and Career Resources

- Students described resources related to local scholarship programs, university-led workshops, and the Future Centers and reported interactions with surrounding organizations.
- Students mentioned that they take advantage of available resources at their schools, although teachers consider that not all students take full advantage of the existing opportunities to prepare for college.

Access to Information Sources

- Students gain college and career knowledge at school, with friends, internet search, and family friends who have lived the college experience.
- Students in schools A and B draw upon other adults in their social and educational networks. Specifically, students mentioned school staff, parents, siblings, peers, extended family (i.e., college graduate aunt), and family friends (i.e., aunt's lawyer).
- Students at school C expressed the need to talk to other adults and students who had lived the same experience.
- Parents mentioned the importance of parent-teacher conferences to receive information to support their students, although they consider that the time and resources provided in these spaces are not enough.
- Parents want access to college and career resources and information and desire participation in selecting post-secondary options and college applications with their students. They sometimes receive the information and do not act on it because they still feel that they need more accompaniment in the process and information they can use at home.
- Parents and students may need more culturally relevant resources that talk to them about practical matters that help them deal with situations that may feel overwhelming.
- Teachers perceive that Latino parents, especially those with students at the lower level, are involved in their children's future and usually attend school

events when schools work around the barriers of work schedule and child care that could affect their attendance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants provided the following recommendations during the research interactions:

1. **Start Early:** College goals have more possibilities to be achieved if seeded early in students' and parents' minds. Provide earlier opportunities for students to start practicing skills that will lead them to be more connected to college opportunities. Connecting with parents and students in middle school is an important step. Schools sometimes focus their attention on seniors because they try to catch up on what was not accomplished before. Extend focus on first-year students, providing them with activities and opportunities adapted to their age and school level for early preparation.
2. **Promote access and use of college and career resources:** Students must not only access available resources, but they must also make active use of them. Research suggests that the number of college resources and school staff that Latino students use is positively associated with the number of college applications students submit; thus, increasing their opportunities beyond high school (Martinez & Cervera, 2012).
3. **School college-going messaging:** School messaging about college and career opportunities should be constant and rich to allow students to estimate challenges accurately and realistically assess their options. High school college-going messages can impact Latino students' subjective framings of the difficulties

they could face and shape their response to the academic challenges (Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015; Martinez et al., 2019). The way the college-going culture is exercised in the school; the consistency, robustness, and continuity of the message are essential to strengthening students' understanding of what they need to do for their future and how they act (Martinez & Cervera, 2012).

4. **Mental Health Support:** Latinx students need additional support to increase their resilience and feeling of being accepted and welcomed, especially in big schools.
5. **Continue providing affordable a Second Language (ESL) support after high school:** Students in most post-secondary institutions do not have ESL supports in their classes. Students receive ESL supports throughout high school and are pulled away from this support at the college level. Under these circumstances, even students with a 4.0 GPA will struggle in college if they are Level 1-3 (even 4) on English proficiency tests. Colleges can provide more robust and affordable ESL programs that allow students to continue learning English while studying at the university level.
6. **Educate Parents:** Students' and parents' preparation should occur early in their educational careers. Many of the Latinx students and parents we spoke to had recently arrived in the United States, and thus early preparation was not possible, putting them at a disadvantage. Reach out to families and work with them through several sessions using culturally relevant resources to promote understanding and support action. Schools, community programs, and local universities have a vital role in providing college information and resources for more outstanding education and career opportunities for students.

7. **Mentoring by college students:** College students can provide students with insights about the college process and career opportunities. Promote more opportunities for professionals and college students coming to meet with students and help develop college-going capital.
8. **Basic financial skills are essential:** Newcomers and many Latinx students usually lack the financial skills required to make wise decisions about saving and lending money for education, which becomes overwhelming for them. Providing this kind of knowledge with culturally appropriate tools and practical examples that talk to their reality is vitally important.
9. **Support to undocumented students:** Provide systematic support to undocumented students and connect with available community resources.
10. **Facilitate transitioning from the newcomer program to a regular high school:** Students drop out shortly after assigned to a regular high school. Recommendations were in two different directions. One was to extend the time students could remain in the newcomer program since it is just a transitional path; the other was to bring the newcomer program elements into the regular schools where students are being assigned.
11. **Keep school teachers and staff informed:** Not all teachers in contact with Latinx students know of available college and career resources. The more teachers know, the easier it will be for them to refer students to the right sources.

CONTINUATION OF RESEARCH

This research has continued. The research team has been expanded to bring in two of the interviewed teachers and an IUPUI graduate student as co-researchers in design-

based implementation research (Fishman et al., 2013). The aim is to develop culturally relevant college and career readiness activities and resources with stakeholders' collaboration (Latinx parents, college students, and teachers). Parents/caregivers can use these resources to support the advancement of their children into post-secondary options. Schools can use these resources to provide more culturally relevant orientation to parents. The results of this second stage of research are expected to be available by August 2021.

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