SERVING LOS ANGELES: URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AMONG LATINO STUDENTS

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This article reports the special efforts of the largest community college district in the country to assist its largest ethnic group to succeed. The Los Angeles Community College District consists of nine campuses; the Latino student population ranges from 22–75 percent of the total number of students. In this article, using questionnaire data from the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College students (TRUCCS) Project, we compare Latino to non-Latino students in terms of both academic and non-academic outcomes. We conclude with the description of special efforts by the district to serve its constituents through special clubs, organizations, and other special programs aimed at the Latino population.

If California were a country it would be the fifth largest economy in the world (California Department of Finance, 2001). Despite recent economic ills and the persistent threats of earthquakes and mudslides, the state’s population continues to expand from internal growth, interstate migration, and foreign immigration. The state’s 1990 population of 29.8 million swelled to 33.9 million in 2000 (California Department of Finance, 2002) and is anticipated to grow to over 45.0 million by the year 2020 (Myers & Pitkin, 2001). California attracts people of all ethnicities and races, but the fastest growing group is people of Hispanic descent. As might be expected, immigration is strong in a state that borders Mexico and is on the Pacific Rim. While 8.6% of the state’s population was foreign-born in 1970, that proportion more than doubled to 21.8% in 1990 (Myers & Pitkin, 2001), rose...
to 26.2% in 2000 (U.S. Department of Census, 2002) and is expected to reach 26% by 2020 (Pitkin, 2001). Thus while the 2000 Census indicated that Caucasians still form the largest population group in the state (46.7%), Latinos are not far behind (32.4%) and are expected to outnumber Caucasians by the year 2020 (U.S. Department of Census, 2001).

Proximity to the Mexican border and a historical abundance of unskilled labor needs has resulted in an even stronger concentration of Latino people in the Los Angeles County area than the state’s average. Of the more than 9.7 million County inhabitants almost half (45%) are Latino (compared to only 31% Caucasian, 13% Asian, 9% African American, and 1% other) (U.S. Department of Census, 2000). Clearly, the future Los Angeles County will have a much higher concentration of Hispanic/Latinos as predicted by the fact that nearly two-thirds of the county’s children are Latino (Hayes-Bautista, et al., 2002). The elementary and high school education in the county is provided through the second largest school district in the nation, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The highly diverse district of nearly one million students with a reported repertoire of 26 native languages acknowledges the added difficulty of serving so many unique student groups (E. Wong, July 1, 2002, Personal communication). It is not surprising that 34.8% of students are classified as English learners (California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS, 2001)). Despite the great diversity in the county, by far the largest ethnic group is Latino. Latinos occupy more than 71% of the public K-12 school seats (LAUSD Net, 2001). Despite their large representation, Latinos are less likely to graduate from high school and be eligible to enter either the University of California or California State University systems. Whereas 38% of the county graduates have completed all required high school courses to be UC-CSU eligible, for Latino students the proportion is only 27.5% (see Table 1) (CBEDS, 2001).

THE LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

To understand the district it is important to note how it fits into the California Master Plan of 1960 that created the state’s tripartite system of higher education. The Master Plan stated that every qualified and interested student must be granted access to higher education. The state’s community colleges were to offer lower-division academic instruction for transfer as well as personal development and occupational instruction. While the University of California and the California State systems were deemed to have strict admission criteria (upper 1/8 and 1/3 of the high school graduating class respectively),
The community colleges were to serve the state as open door institutions (University of California, 2002). The Master Plan was to be revisited every ten years but the first review did not occur until 1973 and then not again until 1989. While the Master Plan eliminated tuition for California residents, it allowed the charging of fees. The latest report with recommendations was released on September 9, 2002. Included in the recommendations were the improvement of articulation of curricula and community college transfer.

The Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) is an urban community college district resembling others such as Florida’s Miami-Dade and New York’s City University systems (CUNY). Like other urban districts, the LACCD serves the “economically, educationally, and ethnically disadvantaged and nationally diverse student populations” (Hirose-Wong, 1999, p.1). The students of the LACCD include students with the following characteristics: questionable immigration status, income below the poverty line, first-generation college students, members of ethnic minority groups, and extensive remediation needs. Almost half (42.9%) of the students enrolled in the nine campuses that make up the large LACCD district report Hispanic/Latino as their ethnicity. Five of the nine campuses are officially Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) and an additional campus is an associate member of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). Latinos are by far the fastest growing group in the district (LACCD, 2002) due in part to the staggering county statistic that “one U.S. born Latino turns 18 approximately every 5 minutes, nearly 100,000 every year (Hayes-Bautista et al., 2002, p.6).

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Graduates eligible for UC-CSU</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6,436</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
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<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1,119</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>9,581</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2,706</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8,639</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple/No response</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28,666</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These students have completed all high school courses required for UC-CSU admission. Percent is calculated by dividing the number of UC-CSU eligible students of each ethnic group by the total number of graduates in that ethnic group.
Figure 1 provides a graph of the enrollment trends by ethnicity for the district from 1972 to the present. It is clear that describing Hispanic/Latino students in the LAUSD or LACCD as “minorities” is not only misleading from a quantitative viewpoint but also may convey many incorrect assumptions.

RESPONSES OF LATINO STUDENTS

Within this article we provide data on the Latino students of the LACCD gathered from the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students Project (TRUCCS). TRUCCS, funded by the Field Initiated Studies (OERI Grant R305TO00154), includes questionnaire and transcript data from 5,000 students across the nine LACCD campuses. The data used for this portion were collected from Spring of 2001 to Fall 2002. The project shuns the application of four-year university definitions, rules, and theories to take a fresh and unencumbered look at community college students. The data include the responses of 2,461 students who listed Latino as their ethnicity.

The Latino students did not differ from the rest of the sample (Los Angeles Community College students) with respect to gender proportions, but did tend to be slightly younger (average age 25 compared to 28 for the rest of the sample) and were less likely to have children. Further comparisons of the Latino students with the general sample revealed several interesting statistically significant differences. Using both questionnaire responses as well as transcript data, we found that Latino students had lower high school grades and were less likely to have taken college algebra, trigonometry, pre-calculus, calculus

![FIGURE 1 Enrollment trends of the Los Angeles Community College District from 1972 to 2001.](image-url)
chemistry, or physics in either high school or while in college. Latino students also were less likely to be enrolled in college level English. These comparisons remained intact even after eliminating that segment of the sample not reporting intentions to transfer to a four-year college. In addition, we found that Latino students were much more likely to be employed fulltime (36.8% of Latinos as compared to 29.3% of other students), and less likely to take out academic loans (3.9% compared to 5.7%).

To understand student immigration patterns TRUCCS did not take the customary path of asking students if they were born abroad. Rather, the questionnaire queried students regarding where they went to school—in the U.S or in another country. We learned that 27% of the Latino students reported attending an elementary school in another country. Moreover, 17.3%, 10.6% and 3.6% reported attending a non-U.S. junior high, high school, or college, respectfully. Generally, Latino students had the same high aspirations as their Caucasian counterparts ($\chi^2 = 7.381, d = 7, p > .05$). Figure 2 provides a graph of Latino student response to “If there were no obstacles what is the highest academic degree you would like to attain in your lifetime?”

Two important college comparisons are grade point average (GPA) and course completion. Latinos lag behind the rest of the district in

![Figure 2](image.png)
GPA. While the college GPA for non-Latinos was 2.70, the GPA for Latinos was significantly lower at only 2.45 ($t = 7.792$, $df = 4517$, $p < .0001$). The second comparison, involving Latino and non-Latino course completion ratios, reveals interesting differences between the two subsamples. The TRUCCS project promotes course completion as the best and most valid measure of community college student success. Completion ratios are calculated as the quotient of the number of courses attempted (in a given semester, year, etc.) divided by the number of courses successfully completed with a grade of C or better (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Pickett, & Moon, 2002). This continuous measure of course completion, used in lieu of the customary dichotomous measure of retention, may be a better and more accurate measure of persistence behavior consistent with the nature and behaviors of community college students. Whereas university students generally either complete their studies or not (making the dichotomous measure appropriate), the academic climate of the community college allows students the freedom to complete all of their courses, some of their courses, or none of their courses without the same level of consequences. The more lenient policies of the community college permit students to “stop out” and return in good standing.

The course completion ratio comparison between Latino and non-Latino LACCD students provided both good and bad news. The bad news was that the rate of course completion was low for all students (55.2%); the good news was that the ratios were not significantly lower for Latino students (53.5%) ($t = 1.924$, $d = 4703$, $p > .05$). In other words, although there is a need for strong policies to encourage retention of all students, Latinos are not abandoning their courses in larger proportions than their non-Latino counterparts.

**SPECIAL PROGRAMS FOR LATINO STUDENTS IN THE LACCD**

Here we provide a glimpse of some of the special services provided by the LACCD for Latino students. In all cases, the activities reported here are open to all students regardless of ethnicity or race. However, the unique flavors of the activities we report were especially attractive to Latino students and hence attracted them in much larger numbers.

**Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers**

The East Los Angeles College (ELAC), one of the HSI campuses of the LACCD, is nestled in a distinctively blue-collar and ethnic area. The enrollment of the college reflects the unique blend of the mostly Mexican and Chinese neighborhood inhabitants. Although the college
has many excellent programs, one of its jewels is the pre-engineering program. California allows freeflowing—students may attend any community college in the state for the same low fee of $11 per unit. The value of ELAC’s pre-engineering program can be seen by the number of students in the program who travel to this campus despite more convenient proximity to other campuses. As a result, ELAC has the largest pre-engineering program of all the California community colleges in southern California. It boasts of a program with all of the lower division requirements necessary to transfer to a university as a full-fledged junior. It is well known in the Los Angeles area that community college students interested in a career in engineering are well advised to begin their educational trek at ELAC. The small classes (averaging about 22 students), and involved faculty provide a positive environment for students. In addition to a chapter of Women Engineers, the department also offers a chapter in the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE). Although a national organization, SHPE was originally founded in Los Angeles in 1974 by a group of engineers working for the city with the objective to provide role models to the Hispanic community (SHPE, 2001).

For an annual fee of $5.00, SHPE provides specific benefits to its members including a national magazine, opportunities for networking, and assistance in writing and building a professional resume. In addition to academic development and a national conference, the club also provides recreational activities such as a retreat, paint ball shooting, ice skating, and bowling parties.

The SHPE opening meeting at ELAC during Fall 2002 produced standing room only crowds. The free pizza may have been partly responsible for the 40-plus interested students, in addition to representatives from southern California universities such as California Polytechnic University and the University of California at Irvine. Although early in the meeting the chapter president clearly stated that members of the Society need not be Hispanic, approximately 90% of the students in residence appeared to be Latino; the rest appeared to be Asian. Seven female students were among the majority of males.

The ELAC chapter of SHPE provides student benefits such as support for conferences and retreats via a point system. Points are earned for attending meetings, raising funds, and other activities. At the time of this writing, the chapter was preparing for two conferences, the West Coast Conference and the National Technical and Career Conference (NTCC) in addition to other more social events such as bowling night, academic bowl (a chance to compete with other institutions in the areas of calculus, chemistry, physics, etc.), and a gala banquet/dance.
In interviews with several members, it became clear that SHPE acts as a bridge to opportunities in a comfortable environment. The club’s maintenance of a predominantly Latino membership appeared to be a positive aspect for many of its members. Manuel, a second year ELACC student who intends to transfer to Stanford’s program in civil engineering related:

I like SHPE because it is comfortable. I make friends in the club and then we work together and take classes. The Hispanic part is good. I worry about going to Stanford because they may see me as different. I see them as different too. I try not to dwell on that, but I do worry. SHPE is mostly Hispanic and that helps.

Other student interviews verified Manuel’s comments. Students appreciated the club and felt that the Hispanic aspects added value. An interview with the faculty advisor verified the value of the club. He related,

The pre-engineering students at ELACC are good students who benefit from opportunities to meet people who can provide assistance to get into the field. SHPE has lots of activities. Certainly most of the members are Latino because the student body here is largely Latino.

SHPE is one of several clubs operating at ELAC that appeals especially to Latino students. Other examples in the district include a Salsa dance team at Los Angeles Harbor College and the Latinos Unidos at Los Angeles Trade Technical College.

**Assistance to Younger Latinos—Middle College High School**

The Los Angeles Trade Technical College (LATT), an HSI, is located in an older part of Los Angeles that most would describe as shabby, poor, and unattractive. Near downtown Los Angeles, this HSI campus serves predominantly Latino (53.4%) and African American (29.2%) students (LACCD, 2002). The college seeks numerous ways to serve not only those individuals who have chosen to enroll as college students, but also others in the neighborhood. The LATT Middle College High School Program began in 1999 with monies provided by the State Chancellor’s Office. The program is one of the campus’s community outreach program serving its largely Latino (60%) and African American (35%) student base. Middle college high schools began in New York almost three decades ago but have spread throughout the U.S. (Greenberg, 1992). Like other middle college high schools, LATT allows high school students at neighboring schools to get a head start on college while finishing up high school. The program provides a
smooth transition to college in a supportive and academically rich and comfortable environment. The program interweaves with the Los Angeles Unified School District’s track system of year-round education where students are grouped into tracks that alternate time in session and time out of session. Typically high school students enroll for college courses during the time that their track is not in session. Therefore, the college courses that provide dual credits for high school and college, do not interfere with high school scheduling. Students receive counseling, textbook loans, bus tokens, and may receive Honors or AP high school credits upon course completion. Courses offered include History, Spanish, Art, and three levels of English (transfer level, one level below transfer, two levels below transfer, and English for non-native speakers). The high school students are placed in the six-week college courses and are mixed with other college students so efficiently that faculty rarely know that the students are actually still in high school.

According to interviews with the program director, the 112 students who were currently enrolled tended to perform well in their college classes. In addition, the program director reported that when students enroll for two or more semesters, they almost always come to LATT after high school graduation.

The counselors and staff in the program are also Latino or African American. According to one of the Latino counselors:

This program helps all of the students. As a Latino, I hope that I am a role model. I want students to look at me and see that I have master’s degree and say “if he can do it, so can I.” All of us want the students to be successful, that is why we are here.

The middle college high school program consists of more than college courses. In addition, students can attend SAT workshops, have access to tutoring and mentoring sessions, and other special programs. There is also a workshop for parents to help them assist their students in filling out forms and understanding the process of going to college.

The first author interviewed several students as they waited to register for their courses. When these students were asked the question, Why are you enrolling in the LATT Middle College High School?, the following responses were recorded:

1. I don’t want to waste time during intersession. I like to keep busy and this helps me to get ahead.
2. I heard about this program at school and I thought I would try it.
3. I came here last year and it was pretty cool. I like it here a lot better than <high school name>. There is more freedom here and I met some cool people.

4. College credit is good. I want to finish college early and get a job.

The LATT Middle College High School Program appears to be working to help Latinos and others in the district get a head start on college. In a neighborhood where only a miniscule number attend college, this unique program provides an opportunity to high school juniors and seniors to sample college in an environment that is aware of the special needs of its clientele, specifically Latino and African American students. Los Angeles Southwest College also operates a middle college high school on its campus.

Puente Project and Club

The Puente Project serves 36 high schools and 54 community colleges throughout the state including three of the campuses of the LACCD (The Puente Project, 2002). Puente is a special program open to all students, but it remains of special interest to the district’s Latino students. Founded in 1981, the Puente Program’s mission is to “increase the number of educationally underserved students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn college degrees, and return to the community as mentors and leaders to future generations” (The Puente Project, no date).

Similar to other campuses, the program provides two semesters of English instruction, instruction in Mexican American literature, a personal development class, academic counseling and mentoring by a local member of the community (Puente, 2002) (also see Cejda & Rhodes, Laden, and Ornelas & Solorzano this volume). We provide information on how Puente works specifically in the LACCD with its urban Latino students.

A visit to the Puente LATT Personal Development class found 38 students jammed into a classroom where every seat was taken. The students were discussing their upcoming meeting with their newly assigned mentors. Students were eager yet apprehensive to meet their mentors. Upon learning that the meetings were to take place at a local restaurant, one of the students asked if the area was served by the Dash bus, an inexpensive transportation service provided in the city for short trips. Following the class, the first author was allowed to retain the class and conduct a type of focus group interview with the large group to learn how Puente specifically helped them. Students felt that Puente gave them an extra “boost” to allow them to function in a college world. Although approximately one-quarter of the students
reported that they would have transferred to a four-year college regardless of Puente involvement, the rest of the students openly admitted that Puente made the difference in their aspirations to now target transfer. One student responded: “I knew I wanted to transfer when I spoke with a Puente counselor who was interested in me.” Another student indicated that Puente helped him by assisting with his program of courses and by laying out the requirements. Other stories followed, each with the same theme—Puente added a special touch that indicated care and concern.

Another theme that emerged was one of apprehension regarding their futures away from Puente. Students felt great comfort in the “majority-minority” atmosphere of the community college, but indicated that they worried about fitting into four-year campuses that will be predominantly non-Latino. They enjoyed interacting with their Puente instructors (all Latinos/as) who not only provided for their academic and social instruction but also served as role models and examples of Latino/a success.

The LACCD Puente experience extends to students not enrolled in the special Puente Project courses through a club dedicated to assisting students succeed. The club is open to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or enrollment in the Puente Project. The goal of the LATT Puente Club was to attract half of its members from outside of the actual Puente Program courses. Attendance at the Puente Club meeting indicated a typical college club. Officers were elected, a constitution was written, and members had a clear agenda of goals and activities for the academic year. With meetings every other week, officers of the Puente Club at LATT were planning tutoring sessions to assist students in filling out financial aid paperwork and university applications. In addition, visits to various university campuses were being scheduled.

Interviews with students revealed appreciation of the club’s activities. In the words of club members:

I am not in the Puente Project. Actually, I wish I was [sic] because I think that those guys have more advantages. But, I am happy with the club because they have weekly writing workshops every Friday and they help me with my homework. It is good that the college has clubs that help Latinos.

Yeah, I am in both the Puente Project and the Club. I like it a lot. I wish the officers of the club would run it a little different, but you know that is the way it is. The club is for us and the Puente faculty and officers want to help us.

Puente is an example of a complete program designed to assist students, specifically Latinos to succeed. Similar to others who
have studied Puente, we found that mentoring and other supports provide needed assistance to Hispanic students (Laden, 2001). There are other examples of programs in the LACCD that attract large numbers of Latino students such as MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement) and PACE (Project For Adult College Education).

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The LACCD is full of eager students looking forward to academic and occupational successes. As an urban district, the campuses find themselves amidst urban problems and serving many poor, immigrant, and first generation college students. And, the majority of the students happen to be Latino. The district is aware of the needs of its students and has taken steps to provide activities that will be of special interest of Latino students.

While we reported on the positive steps that the district is taking, we must stress that the Latino students of the LACCD would benefit from additional supports. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, California is undergoing one of the worst budget cuts in its history. The likelihood that additional programs or supports will be instituted in the near future is highly unlikely. Thus, administrators must continue in their quest to find external dollars to fund programs for Latino and other students. Faculty and staff hiring should be sensitive to the needs of a predominantly Latino student body. Finally, faculty, administrators and policy makers associated with the LACCD must remain cognizant that the future of the LACCD rests largely on the future of its Latino students. Moreover, the fact that five Los Angeles colleges are designated as Hispanic-serving institutions, and others are close behind in achieving 25% or more, means that Latino enrollment cannot be ignored. We close with one final statistic derived from the TRUCCS project. When asked why they choose to go to an LACCD college, 21.4% of the Latino LACCD students reported that the college’s good social activities were slightly to very important in their decision. On the other hand, 87.8% reported they choose their campus because they wanted to get a college degree. It is therefore important to remember the purpose of college and to use the activities for Latinos and other as a pathway or bridge to the important outcome of degree attainment.

**REFERENCES**


