



How Latino Male Students Cope with Academic and Social Obstacles During College

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Despite exponential growth of the Latina/o population and the overall gains made in their college access and success, Latina/os continue to experience lower levels of educational attainment, compared to other subgroups. These lower levels of attainment are felt even more by men of the Latina/o community, who continue to earn fewer degrees (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). While Latino men have increased the rate of attainment of associate degrees by 119%, only 14% of Latino men, 25 and older, have earned a bachelor's or higher (Excelencia in Education, 2015).

Like all students, Latino men experience obstacles during college; however, these students may encounter greater obstacles as a result of being forced to cope with a host of institutional, gender, and cultural differences that they may encounter as they transition to our college campuses. Prior research has illuminated many of the academic and social obstacles that Latino males face while enrolled in college (Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011; Sáenz, Mayo, Miller, & Rodriguez, 2015), but there is little research indicative of the coping processes that Latino men employ in their efforts to overcome these obstacles. Coping can be thought of as the thoughts and actions that an individual takes as an obstacle unfolds either during a single encounter or across time. Given the gender gap in educational attainment facing Latino men, there exists a need for greater understanding, not only of the obstacles these men face, but how Latino men make meaning of and utilize coping processes to overcome these obstacles.

In response to this need, Dr. Sarah L. Rodriguez, along with her fellow Project MALES Faculty & Research Affiliates, Dr. Beth Bukoski and Dr. Charles Lu, explored the academic and social obstacles that first and second generation Latino male college students encountered within a predominantly White, research intensive, and highly selective institution and examined how these students coped with those obstacles. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, their work explored the following research questions: (1) How do Latino men experience and make meaning of the academic and social obstacles that they encounter during college? (2) How do Latino men utilize coping responses to overcome academic and social obstacles? The study referenced in this brief is from ten semi-structured interviews with Latino male undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin. The following is a summary of the key findings from this study.

Latino Male Academic and Social Obstacles

Participants in this study most often encountered obstacles related to five major categories:

- (1) Over-involvement with on-campus organizations. Students within the study were all full-time students, were all involved in multiple on campus organizations, and were often pushed to the limits in terms of time scheduling. Over-involvement was often the result of an intense desire of these students to both enroll in difficult course loads in preparation for later graduate school or careers, and a tendency to take on leadership positions in order to affect meaningful change in their often identity-based organizations (e.g. Latina/o, LGBTQIA).
- (2) Academic under-preparedness. Most of these students were first-generation college students from a low socio-economic background which limited their access to a more rigorous high school curriculum and college preparation strategies. Students struggled with course loads and panicked at the realization that their level of academic work failed to meet the expectations put forth by their professors.
- (3) Complications with family and the college experience. Students often deliberated over how much information to filter from their families as well as how much influence their family's opinion should have on their college decision-making processes. Obstacles related to family influence often highlighted differences between the students and their families in terms of academic achievement level, social preferences, and social and professional goals.
- (4) Shifting college and career goals. The Latino men of this study entered college with preconceived notions of what they hoped to achieve and the career they intended to have once they graduated. Changes in goals were seen as major obstacles, often inciting angst and uncertainty in these students. Shifting goals left many students wondering how they would pursue these new goals and how they would recover from their shaken career identity.
- (5) Struggling to build a support system. Prior to college, many students relied exclusively on their families as their main support system; however, the transition to college left them without an immediate support structure and forced them to seek outside assistance in their new college environment. All of the students within this study encountered obstacles in building friendships and finding mentors, and struggled to build a strong support system once they came on campus.

Coping Responses of Latino Men During College

Acceptance, Positive Reframing, & Shifting Focus to Long-term Goals

Latino men within this study coped by learning to accept obstacles as a normal part of the collegiate academic and social process and, at times, refocus themselves on more long-term goals. Some Latinos attempted to reframe their obstacles, seeing both academic and social obstacles positively. When reframing the issue, these students often framed the obstacle in terms of what they stood to learn from the experience and how this experience could benefit them. By coping in this way, students tried to maintain a positive attitude that they would overcome the present issue.

At the same time, in an effort to cope with mounting pressure from academic obstacles, Latino men also often tended to shift their attention away from current problems and focus on long-term goals (e.g. graduation, financial security, supporting a family). Many of these students focused on goals that were two-fold, benefitting self and family interests or self and mentoring interests. This coping response was often employed immediately, so by placing their sights in the future, Latino male students were able to accept these obstacles as a normal part of the collegiate academic process and be assured that their efforts were not in vain.

Social reflection and building support systems

To cope with these obstacles, students looked both within themselves and to others for support. Most of the participants engaged in self-talk and social reflection as a means of coping with their social obstacles. When students faced overcoming obstacles, some opted to talk themselves through multiple options, deliberate over issues of time management, and encourage themselves to continue, despite their circumstances. Rather than turn to an outside support system, several of the Latino males prided themselves in engaging in self-reflection in which they would evaluate their strengths, weaknesses, and plans for the future.

While some students kept their obstacles a private matter, only a few sought to branch out and build fictive “families” from college peers and mentors. These students often cited biological family as a small part of their support system, however, the bulk of their coping processes and support efforts were shared with individuals that were on-campus and had intimate knowledge of the college-going process. Whether it was due to distance or a gap in knowledge, students often built fictive families in order to develop a sense of belonging on their college campus and create a type of family-like environment where they felt supported.

Avoiding Coping and the Suppression of Feelings

Finally, Latino men avoided coping with academic and social obstacles and attempted to suppress their feelings of anger, sadness, and frustration. Rather than accepting the obstacles as real, Latino men tended to avoid the situation by suppressing their thoughts and feelings on the obstacles. Within this study, the men made active choices to distance themselves from the current obstacle in hopes that the situation might improve naturally over time. Students related that they often attempted to suppress feelings by engaging in activities such as extreme physical activity or alcohol/drug abuse. Rarely did the Latino men find that this was an effective coping strategy, as it usually resulted in exacerbating both academic and social obstacles.

Implications for Practice

The primary goal of this study was to explore how Latino men experience academic and social obstacles and how they cope with the obstacles that they encounter while in college. This study provides much needed empirical data on Latino men, who employ several different types of coping responses, at varying times, in order to overcome a variety of obstacles. These men generally favored responses that enabled them to cope internally with obstacles rather than reaching out to support systems or working with others to create proactive plans of action. Sometimes, unsuccessfully, they even attempted to avoid obstacles altogether or suppress feelings associated with those obstacles. Given the complicated nature of masculinity and cultural implications for men of color to manifest a strong, unwavering existence in the face of obstacles, it is no wonder that coping becomes even more complicated. As a result, Latino men are relegated to dealing internally with obstacles rather than compromising their masculine identities.

This begs the question – why would Latino men prefer to internalize these obstacles rather than reach out for support? We should also consider the implications of this research to the institutional and greater social environment in which these Latino men find themselves. Although Latino men may learn how to cope successfully with such academic and social obstacles, stakeholders should consider why Latino men should be forced to cope with these issues in the first place. By more fully understanding the coping responses of Latino men, institutions of higher education may be better equipped to address the array of obstacles that these students encounter so that eventually we may move beyond the discussion of coping with such obstacles and towards enhancing opportunities for the educational success of these men.

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