



CCWT
CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
College-Workforce Transitions

Vanessa Delgado
Assistant Professor of Sociology
Washington State University
CCWT Early Career Scholar

Supporting
Immigrant-origin
College Students'
Transition to the
Workforce:
Policy Recommendations
for Postsecondary
Institutions

Table of Contents

Overview	3
Background	3
Data and Methods	4
Findings.....	5
Implications and Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions.....	7
References	8

Overview

This research brief provides an overview of findings from research conducted with immigrant-origin Latino/a college graduates. The study sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and immigration related factors shaped this group's transition from college to the workforce. Longitudinal in-depth interviews were used to explore academic setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences with employment after college, and newfound family responsibilities once in the world of work.

Young adults experienced prolonged periods of unemployment and often worked in positions unrelated to their field of study during the pandemic.

Four findings emerged from the qualitative data. First, the pandemic ruptured postgraduation plans as young adults postponed their graduation dates and/or felt ill-equipped to enter the world of work. Second, young adults experienced prolonged periods of unemployment and often worked in positions unrelated to their field of study. Third, once an entry-level position was acquired, financial obligations to their households substantially increased. Lastly, undocumented young adults expressed fear and uncertainty about their futures as they worried about the termination of DACA. These findings provide insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic, economy, socioeconomic origins, and immigration policies complicate the integration of college educated immigrant-origin Latino/a young adults.

Keywords: Latino/a young adults, COVID-19, immigrants, children of immigrants, college, workforce

Background

Children of immigrants now make up a significant proportion of young adults who pursue college degrees in the U.S. today. Estimates suggest that immigrant-origin college students—that is, students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants—represent one in three of all college students on U.S. campuses (Batalova & Fix 2023). The increased prevalence of immigrant-origin college students has increased nearly 131 percent in the last two decades (Batalova & Feldblum 2020). Remarkably, the population of immigrant-origin college students has outgrown that of college students from native-born families (Batalova & Feldblum 2020).

Latino college students make up the largest share of all immigrant-origin college students enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Batalova & Feldblum 2023). In two decades, immigrant origin Latino enrollment increased from 9 percent in 2000 to 18 percent in 2021 at community colleges and from 6 percent to 12 percent at four-year colleges during the same period (Batalova & Fix 2023). Despite these educational advances, immigrant-origin Latino college students still face obstacles that hinder their retention and graduation rates. Educators and administrators remain interested in implementing strategies that will continue to promote the educational incorporation of this growing population.

Immigrant origin Latino college students face a unique set of barriers that negatively affect their ability to complete college. For instance, studies find that Latino/a students from immigrant families are more likely to be first generation college students, face financial constraints, feel obligated

Latino/a students affected by immigration laws experienced an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms, academic hardships, and economic insecurity.

to help their families, and struggle to adapt to the pressures of college life (Mora 2022; Schmalzbauer 2023). Latino/a college students are also more likely to be negatively impacted by federal immigration policies. Consider that Latinos make up the largest undocumented immigrant population in the United States, meaning that immigrant-origin Latino college students are more likely than other student group to be affected by self or parental undocumented status (Millet & Pavilion 2022). Undocumented Latino/a students and Latino/a students with undocumented parents are more likely to report fear of deportation, poverty, discrimination, isolation, and pressure to help other undocumented loved ones (Abrego 2006, Delgado 2022, Gonzales 2009, 2016). These barriers also follow immigrant-origin Latino young adults as they transition into the world of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought on a new set of challenges for immigrant-origin Latino college students. Early studies find that Latino/a students affected by immigration laws experienced an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms, academic hardships, and economic insecurity (Enriquez et al. 2021; Goodman et al. 2020; The Dream US 2020). Other work demonstrates that Latino/a college students took on additional family responsibilities to help their parents navigate the new technological and bureaucratic barriers that arose during the pandemic (Delgado 2020). While studies have not directly examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected immigrant-origin Latino college graduates, research on other college graduates during this time would suggest that these young adults experienced “bumpy” entries into post-college employment (Ahmmed & Maria 2020; Harwin & Sparks 2021; Hu et al. 2022). This research brief joins the emerging research to explore the distinct experiences of immigrant-origin Latino college graduates who sought employment during the pandemic.

Data and Methods

This study draws on 30 in-depth interviews with immigrant-origin Latino young adults who graduated throughout the pandemic years. Interviews are part of a broader longitudinal multi-wave study that captured the college experiences of Latino/a young adults from immigrant families. In-depth interviews were conducted between January and April 2023 and explored five general themes: (1) college graduation, (2) COVID-19 interruptions, (3) family responsibilities, (4) work lives, and (5) attitudes towards adulthood.

Most participants were women, 25 years of age, of Mexican-origin, social science majors, U.S.-born citizens, attended and graduated from the University of California, and had an average annual income of \$40,967. Only one participant discontinued their schooling due to pandemic related challenges. Most participants held full time work and several pursued additional schooling to enrich their vocational skillset. Participants who completed their bachelor’s had a range of two years to six months in the world of work at the time of the interview.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A codebook was created to analyze each interview and garner themes across the interviews. The emergent themes were then connected to the literature on college students, Latino/a immigrant families, and college to workforce transitions.

Findings

The findings demonstrate how immigrant-origin Latino/a young adults experienced COVID-19 related disruptions to their schooling, increased financial pressures, and, for those who were undocumented, immigration-related barriers in the workplace.

Participants experienced COVID-19 related disruptions to their studies.

Half of the sample (N=15) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their decisions to push back their graduation dates. Those who were unable to postpone their graduate dates and were thrust into the world of work felt derailed and experienced more hardships securing a job after college. Those who graduated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic felt additional pressure because of the hiring freezes and stalled employment at that time. The one student who dropped out reported that his decision to leave the university was rooted in the pressure to financially support his mother back home. He shared:

Students who graduated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic felt additional pressure because of hiring freezes and stalled employment.

I helped my mom financially... and with my brother we had doctor's appointments and school... I had to take care of him. Juggling [school], having to work, pay my rent, my bills... all that just took a toll. I entered in a depressive state where I was just like 'I need to go back home, I need to prioritize this [family matters], and then finish school later.'

Participants faced increased financial pressures at home.

Young adults shared that college completion and entry into the labor market created an increased financial pressure to help their working-class immigrant parents. Many young adults found themselves covering their parent's household expenses including rent or mortgage, bills, and groceries. Some even felt pressure to help when they no longer lived at home. Young adults felt that their new positions, which paid relatively more than their parents' precarious jobs, allowed them to take on greater financial roles in their parents' lives. Ariana, for instance, shared how she has started helping her father again after pausing her support when she moved in with her longtime boyfriend:

I felt bad just being able to save money and not helping my parents. That low-income first gen guilt. So, I decided to start helping my dad pay rent again. It's not a lot, but it's something that I know helps them. So, since I think October, I started helping my dad pay rent on home on top of me paying rent where I live. It's hard honestly having to do all this.

An undocumented immigration status negatively impacts young adults once in the world of work.

The young adults who identified as undocumented immigrants had significantly different experiences in the labor market than those who were citizens or lawful permanent residents. Most undocumented young adults were Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients. DACA recipients felt ambivalence as they entered the job market. On the one hand, they felt grateful that their work permit granted them access to most jobs. Yet, on the other hand, the strict work permit stipulations and threats of termination generated a great deal of anxiety for DACA holders. The

postgrad experiences of the undocumented participants underscore how college educated undocumented immigrants search for jobs within the confines of immigration policies. Dana expressed how the strict stipulations of DACA made it difficult to plan for the future:

It's still draining having to do that [renew]. I'm already thinking about how at the end of this year I'm going to have to renew again. Is it the end of this year? I don't even remember. I have to check my calendar, but I don't know if the prices are going to go up. The application is ever changing, so it's super confusing. It's costly, and it's exhausting, and it's stressful. It's just, although I appreciate it, I just wish it was different. I wish it was four years instead of two years.

Implications & Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions

The narratives of the young adults provide some insights that can inform policy and practice at colleges and universities. The following recommendations can help immigrant-origin Latino young adults have a smoother transition into the world of work.

1. *Implement a mandatory course on transitions to the world of work.*

Colleges and universities can help immigrant-origin college students by creating a mandatory course during the last year of their undergraduate studies that equips them with tools and resources about life after college. This course should include information about how to create resumes, where to find jobs, how to best showcase your skillsets, interview performance strategies, and how to negotiate salaries and benefits. Such information can help newly graduated seniors feel more prepared to enter the world of work.

2. *Allow college students access to university resources for at least one year after graduation.*

It is not uncommon that college graduates struggle to secure employment for weeks, if not months, after graduation. Colleges and universities can support students by providing health insurance and access to university resources up to one year after graduation. This short safety net can help students access services they need while they secure stable employment.

3. *Create inclusive programming and resources that target the needs of undocumented college graduates.*

A special emphasis should be placed on programming that addresses the unique challenges of undocumented students because they are unable to apply for internships, jobs, and even some voluntary work. The legal battles on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) have resulted in a greater number of undocumented college students without DACA protections on college campuses. Any programming and resources created for undocumented students should be inclusive of young adults who do not have access to social security numbers. Educators and administrators may consider providing stipends or scholarships if paid employment options are not possible for this student group.

References

- Abrego, Leisy Janet. 2006 "“I can’t go to college because I don’t have papers”: Incorporation patterns of Latino undocumented youth." *Latino studies*. 4: 212-231.
- Ahmed, Sala and Amina Maria. 2020. “Graduating into a Pandemic: Exploring the Factors Influencing the Anxiety Level of the University Finalists” *International Journal of Education*. Retrieved from: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1278113.pdf>
- Batalova, Jeanne and Michael Fix. 2023. “Shared Gains: Immigrant-Origin Students in U.S. Colleges” Migration Policy Institute. Received from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-origin-students-gains>
- Batalova, Jeanne, and Miriam Feldblum. 2020. "Immigrant-Origin Students in US Higher Education: A Data Profile. Fact Sheet." Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/immigrant-origin-students-postsecondary-ed-final.pdf>
- Batalova, Jeanne and Miriam Feldblum. 2023. “Investing in the Future: Higher Ed Should Give Greater Focus to Growing Immigrant-Origin Student Population” Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/the-future-higher-ed-growing-immigrant-origin-student-population/>
- Delgado, Vanessa. 2020. “Latinx siblings step up to help younger brothers and sisters with school – they need help too” *Cal Matters*. Retrieved from: <https://calmatters.org/education/2020/12/latinx-siblings-step-up-to-help-younger-brothers-and-sisters-with-school-they-will-need-help-too/>
- Delgado, Vanessa. 2022. "Leveraging protections, navigating punishments: How adult children of undocumented immigrants mediate illegality in Latinx families." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 84(5):1427-1445.
- Enriquez, Laura E., William E. Rosales, Karina Chavarria, Martha Morales Hernandez, and Mercedes Valadez. 2021. "COVID on campus: Assessing the impact of the pandemic on undocumented college students." *Aera Open* <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211033576>
- Gonzales, Roberto G. 2009. "Young lives on hold: The college dreams of undocumented students." *College Board Advocacy & Policy Center*. Retrieved from: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED532871.pdf>
- Gonzales, Roberto G. 2016. *Lives in limbo: Undocumented and coming of age in America*. University of California Press.
- Goodman, Jarid, Sharron Xuanren Wang, Rubi A. Guadarrama Ornelas, and Marina Hernandez Santana. 2020. "Mental health of undocumented college students during the COVID-19 pandemic." *medRxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.09.28.20203489>
- Harwin, Alex and Sarah Sparks. 2021. “Class of COVID: 2021’s Graduates are Struggling More and Feeling the Stress” *EducationWeek*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/class-of-covid-2021s-graduates-are-struggling-more-and-feeling-the-stress/2021/10>

Hu, Kesong, Kaylene Godfrey, Qiping Ren, Shenlian Wang, Xuemei Yang, and Qi Li. 2022. "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students in USA: Two years later." *Psychiatry Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2022.114685>

Millet, Evin and Jacquelyn Pavilon. 2022. "Demographic Profile of Undocumented Hispanic Immigrants in the United States" Center for Migration Studies. Retrieved from: <https://cmsny.org/publications/hispanic-undocumented-immigrants-millet-pavilon-101722/>

Mora, Lauren. 2022. "Hispanic enrollment reaches new high at four-year colleges in the U.S., but affordability remains an obstacle" Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/>

The Dream.US. (2020). In their own words: The Dream.US 2019-2020 scholar survey report. https://www.thedream.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TheDREAM.US_19-20_ScholarSurvey-ExternalReport-revised.pdf

Schmalzbauer, Leah. 2023. *Meanings of Mobility: Family, Education, and Immigration in the Lives of Latino Youth*. Russell Sage Foundation.

This publication was researched and written by a member of CCWT's Early Career Scholars Program, which was made possible by the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

Suggested citation:

Delgado, V. (2024). Supporting Immigrant-origin College Students' Transition to the Workforce: Policy Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions. Early Career Scholars Program. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. University of Wisconsin–Madison, Division of Continuing Studies.

Keywords:

Latino/a young adults, COVID-19, immigrants, children of immigrants, college, workforce

