LATINO STUDENT TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: Assessing Difficulties and Factors in Successful College Adjustment

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The primary purpose of this study is to understand the factors that affect Latino student adjustment in the first and second year of college. The study examines data from a national, longitudinal survey along with the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire completed by Latino students judged to have high potential for success upon entering a variety of four-year colleges. Results show dimensions of the campus climate affect all forms of student adjustment, as do transitional experiences that are common to most students in the first year. Implications of the findings suggest further college programming and monitoring of adjustment in the second year of college.

Within the last decade, administrators developed programs directed at easing students' transition from high school to college as a means of reducing attrition rates in the first year. Specifically, there has been a recent proliferation of program activity and writing on the freshman-year experience (Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates, 1989; Shanely and Hearns, 1991) with increasing attention devoted to minority student transition to college (Ackerman, 1991; Graham, Baker, and Wapner, 1985). However, only a few studies have focused on the transition experiences of Latino college students or aspects of their adjustment (Attinasi, 1989; Ascher, 1985; Duran, 1983; Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra, 1991; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell, 1993). Improved data collection methods, both at a national level and on individual campuses, reveal a portrait of Latino educational progress that is characterized by stagnation despite a growing, heterogeneous Latino population in the United States (Chapa and Valencia, 1993; Carter and Wilson, 1992). Given that this population has the potential for

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growth in future enrollments at the postsecondary level (McCool, 1984), and as colleges continue to invest in attracting the most talented minority students to their campuses, research on Latino student transition to college life is both timely and necessary.

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the factors that affect the heterogeneous Latino student population and their adjustment to college life. Although the Latino students identified in this study have the highest potential for success, there is a significant amount of adjustment that must take place in the transition to any undergraduate institution. Our objective in this paper is to explore data from a national, longitudinal survey of Latino students and a psychometrically tested instrument in order to understand transitional experiences of the first year, perceptions and behaviors in the second year, and Latino student adjustment in the second year of college. As a guide to our analysis, we rely primarily on the developing body of literature that focuses on college adjustment as well as the literature on aspects of the minority experience that have been typically excluded from college impact models. Aspects of this experience include general campus and racial climate measures that have proven to be particularly important to minority students (Smedley et al., 1993; Hurtado, 1992; Quintana et al., 1991). Therefore, we set out to test results from previous college adjustment studies with a special focus on the minority experience.

The second year of college may be particularly important because it represents the time before a second transition occurs, in which students will soon make a commitment to an academic major and enter a new phase of their college career. According to researchers, the second year is a time when students become more dissatisfied with college and may experience a "sophomore slump" (Feldman and Newcomb, 1969). Additional evidence suggests that some institutions that recruit high-ability African American and Latino students have high first-year retention rates, but have increasing rates of attrition in subsequent years (Muñiz, 1994). Students may also experience additional difficulties, as one student wrote in our study, "Actually, my first year of college was rewarding and satisfying. . . . [The] 2nd year is kicking my ass." Our goal is to provide researchers and practitioners with insights into aspects of the first year that may impact adjustment and Latino student success in the second and subsequent years of college.

PERSPECTIVES ON COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT

Research on student attrition addresses some aspect of college adjustment, either by implication or by including some measures that represent college adjustment directly in their models (Bennett and Okinaka, 1990; Chartrand, 1992). However, college adjustment has not typically been the object of systematic study, nor do researchers rely on a single definition of college adjust-