

# Advancing in Higher Education:

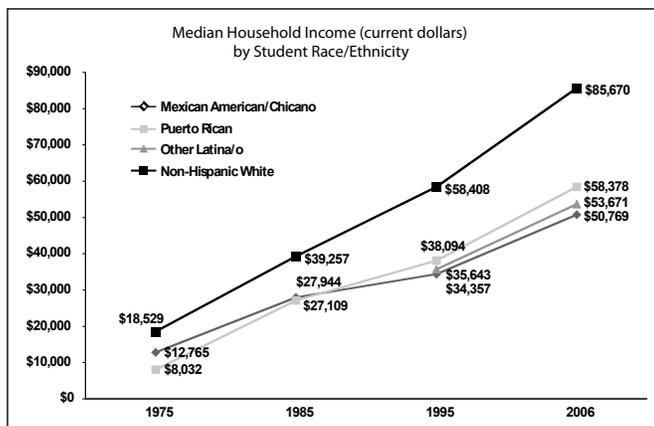
## A PORTRAIT OF LATINA/O COLLEGE FRESHMEN AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS, 1975-2006

The national data for this study come from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. It is based on 261,737 Latina/o respondents included in the CIRP normative trends that predate federal data collection on Hispanic students. For the first time, CIRP trends data are disaggregated by specific Latina/o ethnic origin group, which include Mexican American/Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, and Other Latina/o, and by gender, to highlight the heterogeneity in the population unavailable in other national reports on Hispanic college students.

Key findings reveal several troubling trends for this fast growing group that is now becoming a significant portion of the college-age population.

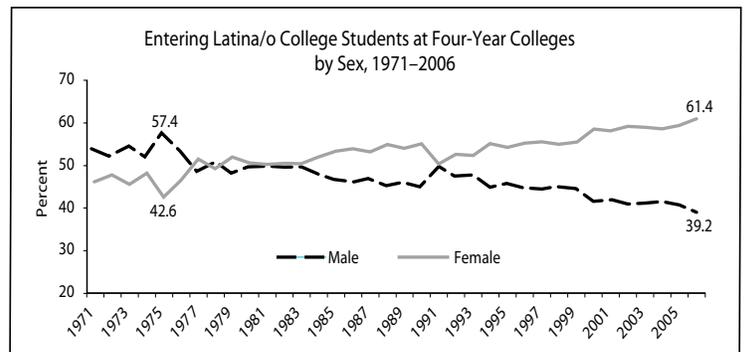
### Disparities in Family Income

The gap between non-Hispanic White and Latina/o parental median household incomes increased fourfold over the decades for college freshmen entering four-year institutions. In recent years, Puerto Rican students report higher family incomes than Mexican American/Chicana/o or Other Latino students entering four-year institutions, although all groups remain far below non-Hispanic White freshmen nationally.



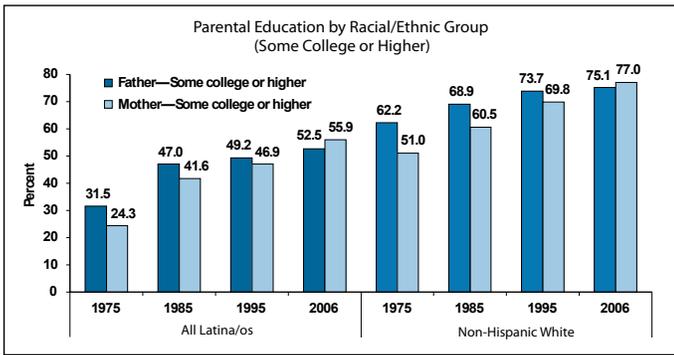
### Declines in Relative Participation of Latino Males

Despite significant increases in the numbers of Latina/o students entering four-year institutions, the proportion of Latino males relative to Latinas declined from a high of 57.4 percent in 1975 to a low of 39.2 percent in 2006. Males have lost the most ground relative to females among Mexican American/Chicana/o students (37.1 percent) entering four-year institutions. Non-Hispanic White males represent 44 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen.



### Latina/os Most Likely to be First Generation College Students

The majority of Latina/o college students were the first in the family to attend college in 1975, now the majority come from households where at least one parent has had some postsecondary education. However, Latina/os remain the racial/ethnic group with the lowest parental education attainment levels. They are just “catching up” in 2006 to the proportion of non-Hispanic White students who reported in 1975 that they come from households where parents had at least some college. Moreover, more than half of Mexican American/Chicana/o students came from families where the mother or father had only a high school degree or less.



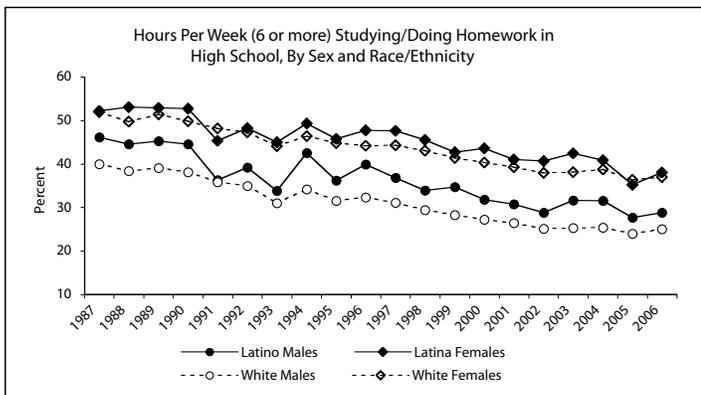
## Nativity and English as a Native Language

Trends suggest that Latina/o non-citizen or English language learners are not increasing in their representation at four-year institutions, although the percentage differs across Latino ethnic groups: Other Latinos are twice as likely as Mexican American/Chicana/os to state they are not citizens and more likely to report that English is not their native language (35.0 percent) compared to Mexican American/Chicana/o (31.0 percent) and Puerto Rican students (16.2 percent). Legal status is not on the survey.

Despite the significant barriers described here, findings counter the myth of lack of effort or academic motivation among Latina/o students.

## Effort and Drive to Achieve

Latina/os demonstrate a strong drive to achieve relative to non-Hispanic White students. Although there has been an overall decline in the amount of time students spend studying or doing homework in high school, Latina/os are more likely to report spending 6 or more hours per week studying/doing homework when compared with their respective non-Hispanic White gender group in many years of the survey.

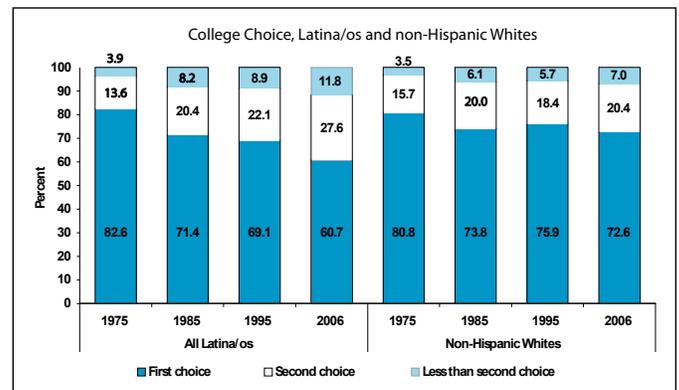


## College Preparation

Although well over 90.0 percent of Latina/os and non-Hispanic Whites have now achieved their recommended years of high school preparation in English, Mathematics, and Foreign Language study set by the National Commission on Educational Excellence in 1982, fewer Latina/os students than non-Hispanic Whites report having taken the recommended two years of physical science (56.5 percent and 61.4 percent, respectively) and both groups have a way to go to meet biological science course recommendations (45.3 percent and 46.8 percent, respectively).

## College Choice

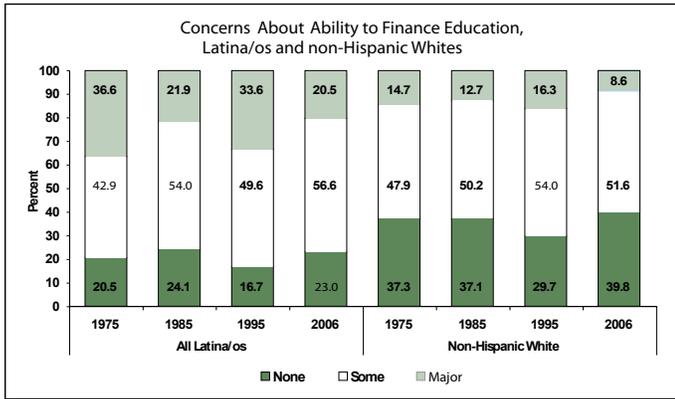
While competition for entrance into many four-year colleges and universities has increased for all students, declines in the percentage of students reporting they are attending their first choice institution has been higher for Latina/os (27.0 percent relative decrease) compared to non-Hispanic Whites (10.0 percent relative decrease). These declines have been higher among Puerto Rican students than other Latina/o groups. Latina/os who enter four-year colleges tend to apply to more colleges than non-Hispanic White students. What is surprising is how prevalent this has been throughout the decades: 14.1 percent of Latina/os applied to five or more colleges, in addition to the one attended, compared to 6.0 percent of non-Hispanic White students in 1975. In 2006, 34.8 percent of Latina/os report doing so compared with 23.0 percent of non-Hispanic White students.



## Concerns About Financing College

One in five Latina/os express a major concern about their ability to finance college at the start of the school year. Although this reflects a decrease since 1975 (36.6 percent), they were 2.4 times more likely than non-Hispanic Whites

to express a major concern about financing college in 2006. In fact, 77.1 percent of Latina/os report at least some concerns about their ability to pay for their college education, compared to 60.2 percent of non-Hispanic White students entering four-year institutions. Not surprisingly, an offer of financial assistance was among the top reasons for Latina/os at both Hispanic-serving institutions and predominantly White institutions in selecting their college.



### Preferred Majors and Career Objectives

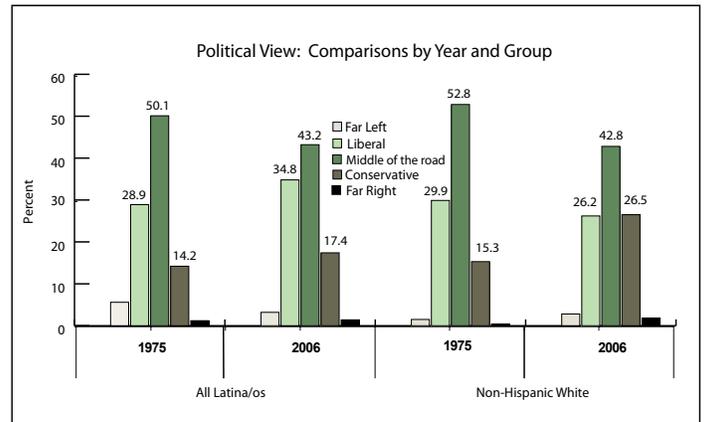
Intended major and career objectives have remained surprisingly stable among Latina/os over time. Biology, Psychology, Political Science, Business, Nursing, and Elementary Education remained among the top ten intended majors at college entry. Latina/o aspirations to become an attorney or judge declined substantially in popularity from 1975 to 2006 (11.1 percent to 5.3 percent), but it still remained one of the most popular career aspirations across these two time points. Other career areas that have remained popular choices include becoming a business executive, physician, engineer, nurse, or teacher/administrator. One notable change from these professions is that Latina/os now select writer/journalist as among the top ten career aspirations at college entry.

### Values, Commitments, and Political Attitudes

Latina/o students show a different set of value commitments than non-Hispanic Whites. For example, at the same time that there has been increasing interest in financial security and success among all students, there has been little change since 1975 in Latina/os rating as “essential or important” the personal goal of “helping others in difficulty” (74.1 percent compared with 64.0 percent of non-Hispanic Whites in 2006). This ranks highly among other Latina/o values such as “raising a family” (75.3 percent) and “becoming very well-off financially” (79.0 percent) that non-Hispanic Whites also rated as important in 2006. Latina/os (49.3 percent) are also significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Whites (27.0 percent) to report “helping to promote racial

understanding” as an essential value, and average 10 percentage points higher on related community-oriented values when compared with non-Hispanic White students.

Historically, Latina/os have tended to characterize themselves as more liberal and less conservative politically than have non-Hispanic White students, and this is still true today: 43.2 percent characterized their political views as “middle of the road”, 34.8 percent as liberal, 17.4 percent as conservative, and only 1.4 percent as far right. In contrast, 26.2 percent of non-Hispanic White students characterized their political views as liberal, and 26.5 percent reported they were conservative. In terms of possible election issues, Latina/os express strong support but also indicate gender differences for the following issues: Latinas were more likely than Latinos to agree that same sex couples have the right to legal marital status (71.3 percent vs. 57.8 percent, respectively) and that the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns (83.3 percent vs 72.0 percent) In 2006, nearly two-thirds supported affirmative action in college admissions. Also very few Latina/os believe that racial discrimination is a thing of the past: 18.2 percent of Latino males and 11.9 percent of Latinas. Latina/o freshmen also express strong support for a national health care plan (77.5 percent) to cover everybody’s medical costs.



Many of the trends identified are evident of persistent patterns over the years, some of which are cause for alarm. A renewed emphasis is required to focus on the success of growing numbers of Latina/o students at four-year institutions, many of whom have already taken on significant challenges to arrive at our doorsteps or “portals” to learn. Practices and policies that are responsive and effective in improving baccalaureate attainment rates begin with understanding more about Latina/o students who enter our institutions to help them accomplish their academic and career goals. In short, institutions and policymakers must be intent on advancing Latina/os in higher education. Our vitality as a nation depends on the investment we make in these students’ success today.

Suggested citation: Hurtado, S., Sáenz, V.B., Santos, J.L., & Cabrera, N.L. (2008). *Advancing in higher education: A portrait of Latina/o college freshmen at four-year institutions: 1975-2006*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

Cover art by:

Ignacio Gomez "Graduates, Our Future" © 1980  
www.ignaciogomez.com

We wish to thank the Ford Foundation for financial support that made this publication possible.

### **The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP)**

CIRP is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions and over 13 million college students. The Higher Education Research Institute has administered the CIRP since 1973. The CIRP longitudinal program consists of The Freshman Survey, Your First College Year Survey, the College Senior Survey, and the triennial Faculty Survey.

Information on the CIRP Freshman Survey, research and publications based on these data, and other research projects conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute can be found on the HERI website at:  
[www.heri.ucla.edu](http://www.heri.ucla.edu)

**Additional reports for campuses can be requested  
by contacting us at [heri@ucla.edu](mailto:heri@ucla.edu) or via our website  
[www.heri.ucla.edu](http://www.heri.ucla.edu)**

**The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.**

### **Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Research Directors**

Sylvia Hurtado, *HERI Director*  
John H. Pryor, *CIRP Director*  
Laura C. Romero, *CIRP Assistant Director*  
Linda DeAngelo, *CIRP Assistant Director for Research*  
Serge Tran, *Associate Director for Data Management/Analysis*  
Jennifer Lindholm, *Spirituality in Higher Ed, Project Director*  
Melissa C. Aragon, *Special Projects Manager*

### **Affiliated Scholars**

Walter R. Allen, *Allan Murray Cartter Professor of Higher Education*  
Alexander W. Astin, *Founding Director and Senior Scholar*  
Helen S. Astin, *Senior Scholar*  
Mitchell J. Chang, *Professor*  
Patricia M. McDonough, *Professor*  
José Luis Santos, *Assistant Professor*  
Linda J. Sax, *Associate Professor*  
Rick Wagoner, *Assistant Professor*  
Victor B. Sáenz, *Assistant Professor, University of Texas at Austin*

---

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
3005 MOORE HALL, BOX 951521  
LOS ANGELES, CA 90095