

ABSTRACT

Hispanic students' attainment of bachelor's degrees has increased 6.4% since 2012, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023). Despite a rapid growth in Hispanic students attaining a Baccalaureate degree, this statistic does not continue at the Graduate level. As mentioned in the Bureau's report (2023), Hispanic students only make up 5.5% of the total Graduate student population in the United States up until 2022. This ethnographic qualitative study will observe low-income Hispanic former dual-enrollment students at a higher education institution in South Texas and analyze their personal definition of success, along with how they define the American Dream. Through a case-study model, closely analyzing conformity theory, the relation between the subjects' personal definition of success and the influence of family values on their achievements will be evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

- Hispanic representation is low in U.S. leadership and Higher Education, with only 4% of Higher Education Presidents being Hispanic, despite the growth of Hispanic students pursuing bachelor's degrees (Burmicky, 2022).
- A graduate degree opens doors to leadership positions, higher paying jobs, and social mobility, but only 6.4% of adult Hispanics have attained a graduate degree compared to 14.5% with a bachelor's degree (Solinas-Saunders et al., 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).
- Financial barriers hinder low-income Hispanic students from pursuing higher education, addressed in Texas by Dual-Enrollment programs bridging underserved communities and Higher Education (Moreno et al., 2021).
- The study aims to assist educators in creating strategies to help underserved populations complete bachelor's degrees, focusing on low-income Hispanic former dual-enrollment students at a rural Higher Education Institution, and will answer the three following research questions:
 - 1) What past experiences have influenced the academic upbringing of Hispanic former dual enrollment students?
 - 2) In what ways have Hispanic family values influenced Hispanic former dual enrollment students and affected their decision to pursue Higher Education?
 - 3) How do Hispanic former dual-enrollment students define the American Dream?

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges Hispanic students have faced in their academic careers, and how their perceptions of success might be an impactful factor of bachelor's completion and pursuit of a graduate degree.

METHODS

Participants:

- 12 currently enrolled students from a South Texas higher education institution (TAMUK).
- Self-identified as Hispanic and between 18 and 65 years old.
- Previously qualified for a Pell-Grant
- Former students of a Dual-Enrollment program.

Procedure:

- IRB approval:** IRB was submitted and received initial approval in English. After receiving initial approval, a Spanish translation of the materials was required to be submitted to allow for interviews to be conducted in both English and Spanish. This translation was revised and approved by a certified Spanish translator.
- Eligibility survey:** Participants completed a survey to determine eligibility. This survey invitation flyer was posted physically throughout campus during the summer 2024 semester. Participants who qualified and consented to be contacted scheduled a virtual interview (Zoom) and submitted a consent form.
- Virtual Interview:** This interview was recorded via Zoom to generate a transcript with the consent of the participant. It consisted of 5 questions and lasted no more than thirty minutes.
- Inductive data analysis:** For the responses received, a systematic process to analyze textual data was used: Tesch's Eight Steps of procedure (Creswell, 2018).

RESULTS

RQ 1: What past experiences have influenced the academic upbringing of Hispanic former dual enrollment students?

- Socioeconomic status
- Desire for self-improvement
- Family expectations and cultural norms

RQ 2: In what ways have Hispanic family values influenced Hispanic former DE students and affected their decision to pursue Higher Education?

- Mutual reliance
- Resilience
- Financial support

RQ 3: How do Hispanic former dual-enrollment students define the American Dream?

- Self-fulfillment
- Financial security
- Balanced lifestyle



Figure 1.1: Participants' definition of success and relation to the American Dream

DISCUSSION

- Dual-Enrollment graduates perceive the program as a step closer to social mobility and have positively benefitted from the financial support that it entails.
- Effective mentoring strategies must be put in place to correctly advise dual-enrollment students before and after college enrollment.
- Limited amount of time did not allow to reach the desired sample size of interviews.
- Sampling strategy did not allow for the population to be reached due to summer session.
- Interested participants (not interviewed) were low-income but not Pell-Grant eligible.

CONCLUSIONS

- This population sample valued the importance of family bonds and are actively working to return the support received during formative years.
- Cultural expectations and norms set by family are valued highly and were often called a motivator to succeed by the participants.
- In future research, we hope that mentoring strategies for dual-enrollment students currently in place are identified by interviewing high school and university faculty/administration.
- We also hope that social mobility trends within dual-enrollment graduates are examined.

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