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EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE RETENTION RATES FOR LATINO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE RETENTION RATES FOR LATINO
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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APPROVED

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on various sectors of society highlighting the disparities that exist within them. This has become most evident in higher educational institutions. Even though there was an increase of Latino students enrolling in higher education institutions prior to the pandemic, in the past few months COVID-19 has had a serious impact on the personal lives of many Latino students, ultimately threatening the retention rate of these college students nationwide. This Capstone project examines and identifies some of the many hardships faced by Latino students at the University of California-Riverside brought forth and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data used in this project was obtained via recently published sources, data from the University of California Office of the President, Chicano Student Programs at UCR, and personal anecdotes. Commonly recurring economic, social, educational, and personal hardships faced by Latinos during the COVID-19 pandemic are identified. The impact of these hardships on the retention rates for Latino students are explored for the current 2021-2022 school year and the academic years that follow. Finally, the project identifies and suggests some policy changes at the state and federal level and at the University of California-Riverside that can be implemented, to lessen the impact of these economic and social disparities. Further research is suggested to accurately measure the extent to which the pandemic has impacted and influenced the retention rates of Latino students at UCR and other higher education institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1920's, Latinos have faced discrimination and racism through housing, education, and economic opportunities. Despite many Latino children being born in the U.S, they were often deprived of their right to a proper education. They were educationally segregated and faced unequal conditions in their schools due to their ethnic origin. Some examples include limited economic investment to their educational institutions. Families such as the Mendez fought this educational injustice through the justice system to ensure a proper education for their children as was observed through the famous court case of *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947). There has been progress in terms of educational opportunities for the Latino population since the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Walkouts of the 1960s. However, the educational opportunities do not reflect the need for the exponentially growing Latino population.

Latino students make up more than half of California's graduating high school population; however only 4% of those Latino students enroll at a UC (Paredes et al., 2021). Opportunities for Latino students are significantly lower than those available for white students. Only 39% of Latino high school graduates are college ready while 52% of white high school graduates are college eligible (Paredes et al., 2021). Latino students' deprivation of educational opportunities keeps them in poor socioeconomic conditions, turning into an unbreakable socioeconomic generational cycle.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the socioeconomic and education disparities that exist within the Latino population. People of color were more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 leading to health and economic complications. First-generation Latino university students were more prone to feeling the burden of this pandemic. The increased difficulties faced by Latino college students led to many putting their educational goals aside or

on hold to prioritize the well-being of their family. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many students' academic and personal lives nationwide. As a result, there has been a decrease in the retention rates of Latinos in higher education institutions. Existing economic, social, educational, and personal hardships that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated have negatively impacted the retention rates of Latino students at UCR and other higher educational institutions nationwide for the 2021-2022 school year. The ultimate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Latino retention rates at higher education institutions is yet to be fully measured, since it will have a long-lasting effect on the retention rates for future academic school years.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease that led to a worldwide pandemic and massive lockdowns to occur as a preventative measure to slow down transmission. In March 2020 many countries around the world, including the US were forced to transition from an in person learning to an online format to minimize the spread of the virus (Viner et al., 2020). Due to the sudden nature of this transition, many students and staff administration were caught off guard and were highly unprepared. As a result, both students and staff alike struggled to adapt to this new online format of learning given the additional pressure of limited technological resources (Cutri et al., 2020). The largest demographic group with the highest infection and death rates in California were Latinos (Hayes-Bautista et al., 2020). Latinos are more vulnerable at getting infected due to the high amount of Latinos deemed as essential workers. As a result, many Latino students faced more family, social, and economic issues due to the pandemic. For example, many students had to take on a parental role while their parents worked or were ill (Kimble-Hill et al., 2020). Many working students were also affected. Challenges such as these have hindered their overall ability

for academic success in online school (Means and Neisler, 2020). Socioeconomic challenges ultimately impacted the Fall 2021 retention rates for Latino university students.

Previously to the pandemic, there was a steadily increasing number of Latino students admitted to universities. This trend continued even during the pandemic. In July 2020, the University of California announced that the Latino first-year student admission rate increased from 34% to 36%, making it the largest minority ethnic group to be admitted (Smith, 2020). Even though a more significant number of Latino students were admitted, this does not indicate that many will attend or ultimately graduate from a higher education institution. Latinos faced many existing challenges while attending higher education institutions before the pandemic (Núñez, 2014). Such discrimination in academic institutions included a lack of representation in staff, faculty, administration, and economic challenges (Ovink, 2017). The pandemic has made these existing challenges more evident and increased their impact on Latino students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted Latino disparity in California. As a result, Latinos are the largest demographic group impacted directly and indirectly by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bibbins-Domingo, 2020). Latino university students have keenly felt this burden, but many have continued online school despite family members becoming sick, increasing economic problems, and additional added responsibilities (Sáenz and Garcia, 2020). Despite the many challenges brought forth by the pandemic, many Latino students have demonstrated perseverance which may aid them in continuing their educational journey (Bono et al., 2020). Latinos are facing economic and social disparities brought forth and worsened by the pandemic; however, perseverance may be a critical factor in their ultimate academic success.

However, it is no surprise however, that Latinos at predominantly White universities reported a higher depression rate than those attending a diverse campus (Coughenour et al.,

2020). Likewise, mental health will be a crucial factor influencing the overall retention rates of Latino students. The choice of higher education institution may also play a significant role in the ultimate success of Latino students. Such as the available resources and understanding on behalf of the university administration. The role of institutions in their student's success has highlighted the importance of how higher education institutions operate. There is a trust market exchange between students and higher education institutions. Students exchange money and trust the higher education institution to provide them with the best possible education (Blankenberger and Williams, 2020). This contract ultimately emphasizes the necessity of accountability and integrity on behalf of the school, especially during unprecedented times. Higher education institutions can be viewed via Gaus's ecological approach in which public administrations function as an ecosystem. The introduction of a catastrophe causes an imbalance that can only be restored via systematic change (Blankenberger and Williams, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing challenges faced by Latinos it has highlighted them in a way that cannot be ignored and which will ultimately result in a change to help avoid these issues in the future. It has also highlighted key factors in the Latino community that help students preserve through this and many unprecedented hardships. This project shares how the pandemic affected students negatively, while simultaneously challenging existing support systems. An individual's family and community in school institutions, like at the University of California- Riverside will be a critical source of motivation for students to overcome these challenges and continue on their educational journey. The information presented in this project shows only a fraction of the difficulties of navigating the higher education system as a Latino student during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth many changes to the social, educational, and economic daily lives of people around the globe. Educational institutions were one of the most critical sectors impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The immediate transition to a remote format of learning in March of 2020 impacted the learning abilities of students and the instructor's ability to present information in a way that was easy to process. The drastic changes in the learning environment impacted student mental health and anxiety (Correia et al., 2022). One of the biggest challenges of the new remote learning format was the reduced engagement between students, peers, faculty and staff. This was observed through reduced access to learning material and the absence of the necessary interpersonal interactions with peers (Lederer et al., 2021). Virtual learning challenged students, educational institutions, and instructors to adjust the learning curriculum to the immediate conditions presented by COVID-19.

Recent studies have begun to analyze and understand the immediate impact of the pandemic on university students. The shift to virtual learning affected the “academic, social, mental, and physical aspects of the university experience” (Correia et al., 2022, pg. 2). The lack of interactions with their peers and faculty resulted in a reduced sense of belonging, a greater isolation and higher rates of mental health issues (Lederer et al., 2021). In a cross-sectional survey study conducted by researchers at Texas A&M University in the Southeastern United States, 71% of students who participated reported increased stress and anxiety levels due to the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). In the same study, they found that approximately 18% of students exhibited suicidal thoughts. Mental health issues such as these were more prevalent in young adults. As a result of these mental health issues, students reported changes in their behavior such

as reduced sleep, social interaction, difficulty concentrating, and an increased fear about the well-being and health of their family. As will be discussed later on, mental health will play an essential role in the ultimate success and well-being of students. The transition to a remote setting influenced students' mental health and access to student services such as food pantries, internet connection, housing, student disability services and work-study income (Lederer et al., 2021). The loss of access to many resources, interpersonal interactions, and additional stress challenged students like never before to perform well under pressure while balancing their educational goals.

Even though increased stress and anxiety was pervasive in university students, it affected students disproportionately. Although the impact of the pandemic on students cannot be fully measured or understood yet, some studies have measured the disproportionality of the hardships brought forth by the pandemic on the different student demographics. Gender may play a significant factor in the overall impact of the pandemic on students. Various studies have found that the pandemic affected female, male, and non-binary students differently. According to one study, females reported higher levels of stress and negative effects on social isolation, academics, and mental health when compared to their male counterparts (Prowse, 2021). The same study showed differences in coping mechanisms used throughout the pandemic such as social media, video games, and cannabis. Another study found that non-binary students expressed more concerns and stress over health care, legal rights, and high levels of social isolation (Salerno, 2020). Intersectionality also plays a very important role in determining how the pandemic affects students. Correia et al. conducted a study in which they surveyed 657 undergraduate students at the University of South Alabama during Fall 2020 and they found that there was an increase of food insecurity and stress levels in “females and gender expressive individuals, along with

Hispanic/ Latinx, Asian/Asian American, and black/African American students” (Correia et al., 2022, pg. 1). They also found that students attending school in urban areas experienced more worries of contracting the virus than rural students. Different demographics experienced the hardships of the pandemic in their own way.

An important factor to keep in mind when discussing the impact of the pandemic on Latino students, in particular, is the higher education institution they attend. Some higher education institutions have diverse student populations and are oriented to serve a specific student population ,while some are not. Often, these schools are designated to reach out and help disadvantaged student populations overcome economic hardships or bridge gaps in knowledge of higher education. Such is the case for certain schools within the UC system and nationwide. UCR, like other UC schools such as UC Irvine, UC Merced, UC Santa Barbara and UC Santa Cruz are designated Hispanic-Serving Institutions or otherwise known as HSI. As of recently, 5 out of the 9 UC schools that are a part of the UC system are designated HSI and thus experience a high Latino student demographic enrollment and recruitment (UC Office of the President, 2021). The remaining four schools are considered emerging HSI’s and are aiming to become HSI schools in the future. HSI schools receive grant funding from the U.S Department of Education to help aid Latino students by expanding educational opportunities at the undergraduate and beyond undergraduate level. The type of higher education institution such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions would play an important role in determining the opportunities available to Latino students both previous to the pandemic and during the pandemic. It will play a crucial role in student success and retention rates. Hispanic-Serving Institutions serve a higher Latino student population and thus provide a different level of understanding to its students than a normal university would.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS

The biggest obstacle Latinos face is economic hardship, which the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated. Many Latinos live below the poverty line in California and this number has only been increased due to the pandemic (Parolin et al., 2020). Latinos make up only 38% of the state's total workforce but they make up 49%, close to half, of the frontline workers in California (Alamo, 2020). This was one of the first and most impacted sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the limitations of a remote transition. Only around 24% of Latinos could conduct their work remotely compared to their peers (Alamo, 2020). Not only were Latinos affected due to limitations on a remote transition, but they suffered disproportional job losses given that the frontline industries they work in were hit hardest during the pandemic. We should also note that younger workers between the age of 16 and 24 were less likely to work remotely compared to other age groups (Alamo, 2020). Latino university students and their families were most affected by the sudden loss of jobs and reduced hours as frontline workers.

One study conducted by researchers found that 52.7% of single Latina mothers had to engage in economic cutbacks and 91.7% were frontline or essential workers who suffered from a decrease in hours at work or job loss (Hibel et al., 2021). As a result of the financial constraints and job loss, increased stress and anxiety was observed in Latina mothers. Even though stimulus checks were distributed in the latter months of the pandemic to relieve some financial constraint, the study showed that it did not help alleviate any of the worries associated with the financial crisis faced by these mothers (Hibel et al., 2021). Due to the cut back of work hours or job loss in Latino households, many Latino university students took it upon themselves to either seek employment or increase their work hours to help their family's financial situation. This resulted in a struggle to choose whether to prioritize their family's financial well-being or other important

priorities such as their education. Different factors including their family's economic situation, resulted in students either postponing their education or dropping out of school completely. This was also a topic commonly discussed by the interviewees from UCR, in which students were forced to drop out or put their educational plans on hold due to the economic impacts suffered as a result of the pandemic. As shared by one interviewee, the students they worked with either had to pick up more hours from their current job, or some students who did not have prior employment had to seek a job. This resulted in increased stress and worry as students were forced to create a balance between online classes and work. The financial burden carried by Latino students was made worse by the pandemic. In many instances, they became the only source of income for their families, leading many students to choose their education or their family's financial needs.

In addition, Latino students in particular, suffered from the loss of campus jobs or work-study as due to campus closure. Approximately 58% of students worked in on-campus jobs before the pandemic (Higher Learning Advocates, 2018). The loss of these jobs resulted in additional financial hardships for students, especially those with pre-existing economic problems. The most common difficulty that the anonymous interviewees I interviewed shared was financial constraints, which impacted the most Latino students they worked with at UCR. This was manifested in different ways. For example, the most common result of economic constraints of students was the immediate relocation of students to their family homes if they were housing on campus. Since many Latino students no longer had income, they moved in with family if they were living on-campus housing. Some students who did not have a home to return to after campus closure were disproportionately at risk for housing insecurity (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, 2015). While

others who could return home, returned to violent circumstances. (Lederer et al., 2020). Such was the case for many students part of the LGBTQ+ community in which they would return to “hostile or unsupportive families or communities” (Lederer et al., 2020, pg.3). The absence of income from on-campus jobs increased the financial burden of Latino students. Each student’s situation is different and will differ from their peers, however one thing is certain. The immediate transition to an online format along with financial circumstances made worse by the pandemic affected a student’s ability to focus on their education.

SOCIAL HARDSHIPS

Pre-existing notions and stigmatization of people of color, especially Latinos, has led to structural racism and discrimination in many institutions such as healthcare, housing, and the workplace, to name a few. This situation was only heightened and made more apparent during the pandemic. The disparities in access to and quality of healthcare and living and work conditions due to structural racism lead to disproportionate effects of the pandemic on the Latino community (Hooper et al., 2020). This includes higher exposure to COVID-19 due to a multitude of vulnerable situations. Latinos were “8.1 times more likely to live in high-exposure-risk households than White people” as was found in one study (Reitsma et al., 2021, pg. 1). A high-exposure-risk household are households “with one or more essential workers and fewer rooms than inhabitants” (Reitsma et al., 2021, pg. 1). Many Latinos in California lived under these conditions during the pandemic, contributing to a higher possibility of contracting COVID-19. It also made it difficult for Latino students to focus on online school since there were fewer rooms for inhabitants. Individuals in these households who tested positive for COVID-19 found it more difficult to follow CDC guidelines of isolation and quarantine. The same study

found that Latinos were more likely to live in these conditions, but were also “overrepresented in cumulative cases, and underrepresented in cumulative testing” (Reitsma et al., 2021, pg. 1).

Other vulnerable situations such as a majority of Latinos being essential workers and their use of public transportation contributed to the disparities faced by Latinos in California. The combination of these risk factors and COVID-19 inequalities resulting from systematic racism disproportionately impacted Latinos living in California.

In addition, due to socioeconomic conditions, many Latinos suffer from pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes, higher blood pressure, and heart problems which increase their chances of dying if they contracted COVID-19 (Garcia et al. 2021). One study observed that the most frequently observed traits found among those who have passed away were “age 65 years or above, male, Hispanic, foreignborn, and educational attainment of High School or below” (Garcia et al. 2021, pg. 1). Students and their families were more likely to contract or pass away from COVID-19 complications. This contributed to one of the most significant hardships Latino students faced while attending online school. It is not simply about losing someone, but the traumatic experience of seeing a loved one sick and not considering the added mandates prohibiting hospital visitations and other funeral limitations. Factors such as these resulted in additional hardship for students during the pandemic.

Mental health is also a big issue that affected many Latino students and their households during these unprecedented times. The accumulation of different challenges Latino students faced, including school, family life, economic situations, and other factors leads to increased stress. Cultural issues and perspectives complicated mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. For example, mental health is an issue that is often belittled, stigmatized, or ignored in Latino households. How can you help address mental health if it is a taboo in Latino culture?

Another cultural factor that comes into play, as one of the interviewees mentioned, is the use of household remedies to alleviate health problems. This poses the question, how can you help a community who relies heavily on household remedies to alleviate something as serious as mental illness? This left faculty and staff stuck between being advisors and a kind of therapist to Latino students. It also raised the issue of mental health resources that while abundant during the pandemic, did not mean they would be used by Latino students. Overall mental health was and still is a consequence of the pandemic and the challenges it brought along with it. Social and cultural issues played an important role in impacting Latino university experience during the pandemic.

EDUCATIONAL HARSHIPS

Before the pandemic, Latino students struggled to navigate the higher education system. This is true given that most Latino students are first-generation students, the first of their families to attend a higher education institution. As a first-generation student myself, I understand the challenges of attending a higher education institution. Challenges can range from simply navigating registration to study habits and engagement with professors or peers to more complex issues such as understanding the necessary requirements to graduate with a certain degree. My experience navigating a higher education institution may differ from other students, given the intersectionality of my identity as a Latina first-generation student. However, one fact is certain, higher education is a complicated labyrinth for those who do not have prior experience or someone who can help navigate the system. The navigation of higher education institutions is more challenging for first-generation Latino students due to the limited knowledge of finding helpful resources, including tutoring, emotion, mental, and financial support. The

intersectionality of being a first-generation Latino student complicates a student's ability for success in higher education institutions.

Latino students not only struggle with navigating the difficulties in higher education institutions but also struggle with community inclusion. Latino students experience a heightened sense of not belonging in higher education because “they do not feel welcome on campus,” a lack of ethnic representation with faculty and staff, and little representation in the educational curriculum (Salinas, 2017, pg.746). Even though Latino admissions and enrollments have been increasing in the past decade, if the environment is not only inclusive, this can impact students’ ability to learn, ask for help, and ultimately complete their higher education goals. Pre-existing disparities in the education system faced by Latino students pose a challenge to these students’ success, retention, and graduation rates. Institutional inclusion plays a big role in ensuring Latino student success.

The pandemic exacerbated existing academic challenges for first-generation university students. Soria et al. found that first-generation students “experienced more challenges adapting to online instruction” such as facing complications when finding “adequate study spaces and lack of technology (Soria et al., 2020, pg.1). They also found that first-generation students were “less likely to be able to meet during scheduled virtual class times,” as well as suffering from economic problems like worrying about how to pay for their education to a higher degree when compared to continuing-generation students (Soria et al., 2020, pg. 1). Latino first-generation university students faced a combination of educational hardships including ethnic inclusion and hardships associated with being first-generation. The transition to an online environment not only highlighted preexisting hardships but also presented additional challenges that students

were expected to overcome to succeed in online learning. Educational hardships will also be a tremendous factor in Latino students' success and retention during online learning.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON UCR & LATINO STUDENTS

The University of California- Riverside (UCR) is a diverse and inclusive campus composed of a diverse student body. The undergraduate student population consists of 41.5% Latino, 33.8% Asian, 11% White, 3.3% Black or African American, 5.6% multiracial, and many other ethnic identifying students (Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, 2022). The student experience at UCR may differ from their peers at other universities around the United States, given that UCR is both a Hispanic-serving institution and has a diverse student body.

Furthermore, as of Fall 2021 more than half of undergraduate students at UCR, 54%, are first-generation students and are the first in their family to attend college, and 49% are Pell grant recipients (University of California, 2022). On the other hand, the faculty at UCR is to some degree diverse, but does not reflect their student population. As of Fall 2021, a little more than half of the faculty at UCR is White (52.1%) while Asian (23.4%), Hispanic/Latino (9.8%), Black/African/African American (3.9%), and American Indian (0.8%) faculty make up the remaining half (University of California, 2022). This will have a major impact on student experience and their ability to succeed at UCR.

UCR, like many schools across the U.S., was forced to transition its in person curriculum to an online format in March of 2020. This transition occurred during week 10 of the Winter 2020 quarter; final exams were held remotely the following week. On March 13, 2020 the university was closed by health officers from Riverside county. School closure lasted from March 2020 (end of Winter 2020) to August 2021 (Summer 2021), more than a year of online

learning. UCR was ready to open its campus with heavy COVID-19 precautions, such as increased sanitation stations, mask mandates, and social distance whenever possible in late September 2021 (Fall 2021). During the Fall 2021 quarter, there was a combination of in-person, online, and hybrid classes.

However, during winter break of December 2021, there was a sudden surge of Omicron COVID-19 cases. The school administration decided to initially start the Winter 2022 quarter virtually for two weeks. Still it was later expanded to nearly a month of online classes, until January 31, 2022 with the return of in-person classes with the option of continued online classes if the professor preferred. **Figure 1** below is a summary of this timeline. This timeline shows the uncertainty that COVID-19 presented to students, faculty and staff, with a mixture of online, in-person, or hybrid courses.

Highlights of COVID-19 Remote Learning at UCR

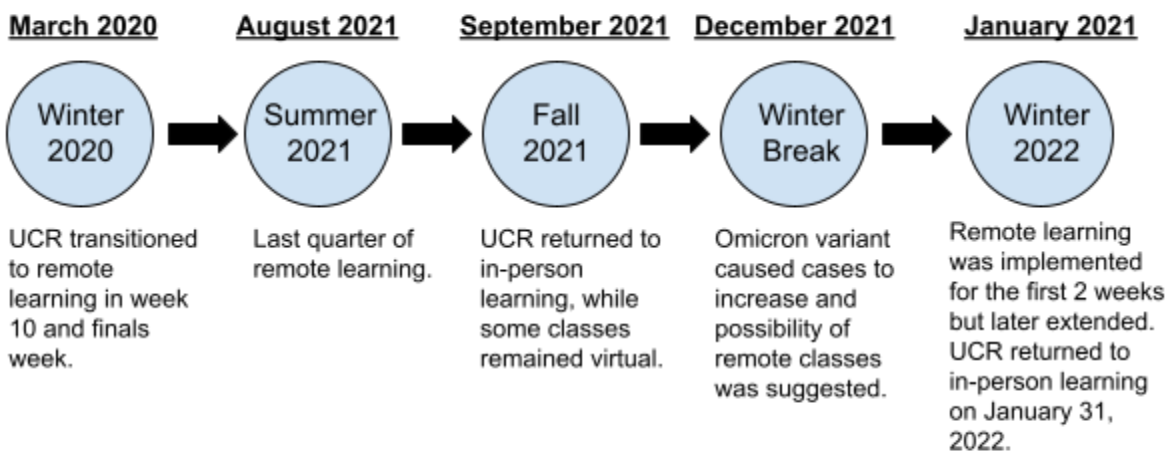


Figure 1. The figure above is a summary of the major events that occurred in UCR's remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The uncertainty of the pandemic posed an additional challenge for Latino students and faculty. Given the fluctuation in the number of COVID-19 cases, it was never certain whether

UCR would hold in-person classes or remote classes. Decisions on the format of learning for each quarter were made based on Riverside county guidelines, California guidelines, and the number of COVID-19 cases present. The well-being of students, staff, and faculty remained UCR's top priority. However this uncertainty resulted in students being unsure of housing, jobs, and access to technology. A common worry that was shared by students regardless of their ethnic background was whether their campus housing would be guaranteed. Problems such as these hindered students ability to adapt and succeed during this unprecedented time.

Economic, social, and educational hardships were all experienced in different ways by Latino students at UCR. Based on the informal interviews conducted at UCR, the interviewees listed financial troubles as the number one hardship that affected the Latino students they worked with. Students presented trouble in unemployment, housing and food insecurity, increased financial responsibility, and increased work hours to name a few. The second most common hardship faced by Latino students at UCR was mental health issues. These issues resulted as a combination of individual factors such as financial stress, health concerns, isolation, distance learning, first-generation issues, and uncertainty of the pandemic. The interviewees also pointed out the increasing challenges faced by Latino students as a result of a remote transition to online learning. Students and faculty were ill-prepared for this unexpected situation. Latino students faced issues obtaining a stable internet connection, study space, and technology (laptops). Students at UCR faced both similar academic and nonacademic problems that were affecting students nationwide.

These issues were only further complicated when immigration status and gender identity were taken into account. The interviewees shared complications LGBTQ+ Latino students faced. One example includes returning to a hostile environment at home due to financial necessity.

Some Latino students were “out” to family but were not accepted while others had not “come out” and felt unsafe being who they identify as. Undocumented Latino students also faced their own set of issues like a loss sense of security, increasing financial burden, and lack of access to healthcare. Opportunities of financial relief were more limited for undocumented individuals, which only worsen their anxiety and stress. It is imperative to understand that Latino individuals encompass a wide range of people from different backgrounds. This includes but is not limited to immigration status, gender identity, and social class. For this reason, the experiences and challenges faced among these students differ from one another. Challenges exacerbated by the pandemic may differ from case to case but the overall themes are present in the Latino student experience.

UCR, like other higher education institutions, offered mental health resources, financial, technological, and other types of support to students during the pandemic. Assistance programs such as these helped alleviate some of the issues faced by students. An example of a program created to help students transition to remote learning at UCR was the Loan2Learn program. This program was created by UCR to make sure that students and faculty had access to the appropriate technology and equipment to work/ learn remotely (Ghori, 2020). Due to the pre-existing economic disparities that many Latino students face, UCR was able to ensure they provided the appropriate resources to help mitigate the unexpected transition to online learning. In addition, UCR has many student programs such as African Student Programs, Asian Pacific Student Programs, Chicano Student Programs, Women’s Resource Center, and Undocumented Student Programs, to name a few. The student programs on campus were a huge support system for students at UCR during the pandemic. All student programs worked hard to ensure their resources and staff were accessible online within a short period of time. The diversity that exists

at UCR helped better prepare this higher education institution to provide the necessary support for students during this unprecedented time.

RETENTION RATES IN THE UC SYSTEM AND UCR

According to the data from the UC Office of the President, continuing undergraduate Latino student enrollment in the UC system remained constant with a slight increase in the past few years. Between the 2016 and 2017 academic school year there was a 1% increase from 23% to 24%, which remained constant until 2019 with another 1% increase to 25% (University of California, 2022). Latino students make up 25% of the total student population of continuing students in the UC system as of Fall 2021. The continued enrollment of Latino students in the UC system when compared to other ethnic groups overall is much lower than the rate at UCR. At UCR, the Latino student population has experienced a steady increase from year to year with the exception of the 2016 and 2017 school year that experienced a 4% increase from 35% to 39% (University of California, 2022). Most importantly, as was predicted, the data shows a decrease between the 2019 and 2020 school year by 2%, from 41% to 39% respectively (University of California, 2022). Recent data shows that for the 2021 school year, the percentage of Latino students in the total student population of continued enrollment remained at 39% (University of California). According to the available data, retention rates have remained constant within the last few years with a few small declines.

Every two year the nine undergraduate UC campuses distribute the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey which allows students to share their experience while attending a UC campus. The information gathered ranges from academic habits to academic engagement to their experience outside the classroom. The survey was distributed to

measure the number of students who planned to re-enroll for Fall 2020. It found that 93% of Latino students planned to continue enrollment at UCR for Fall 2020, while 5.9% were unsure, and 0.8% planned not to enroll for Fall 2020 (University of California, 2021). From those who were unsure or planned not to enroll for Fall 2020, the leading cause for this decision was due to a planned graduation prior to this term, followed by financial challenges, family responsibilities, and health concerns (University of California, 2021). According to the UCR Institutional Research, there was a decline in Latino year 1 student retention rates between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 from 91% to 88.2% (UCR Institutional Research, 2021). Retention rates are measured based on a student's enrollment fall quarter and continued enrollment the following fall quarter. Year 1 refers to students who completed their first year and re-enrolled for the fall of the following year. Year 2 student retention rates are not available, but it can be predicted that they will follow a similar trend. This is a big decline that has not been observed since Fall 2015 to Fall 2016 which experienced a decline from 91.3% to 88.9% (UCR Institutional Research, 2021). Retention rates may continue to decline steadily due to the influence of non-academic factors as mentioned in the investigation.

As was predicted, the retention rates and the percentage of Latino students in the total student population who continued to enroll in both the UC system and UCR has declined as a result of the pandemic. The University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey provided insight and potential reasoning for this decline. As mentioned previously, some Latino students simply planned on graduating early but others faced economic challenges and health concerns that prevented them from continuing. The data shows a parallel to the main reasons as to why Latinx students decided to put their education on hold or leave it all together as a result of the pandemic. Economic difficulty such as financial challenges and social hardships such as family

responsibilities were a few examples as to why students planned on not enrolling for Fall 2020. The same decline is predicted for the 2021-2022 school year due to the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. However, support systems and increasing relief may allow students to continue at UCR. Challenges faced by Latino students such as economic, social, and educational hardships all play a crucial role in hindering the students ability to continue in higher education. That is why it is imperative for the federal and state government as well as higher education institutions to take initiatives to alleviate these burdens.

POLICY CHANGES AND INVESTMENT TO IMPROVE HARSHIPS

Higher education institutions were not prepared to handle a large-scale unprecedented event such as a pandemic. As an aftermath of the pandemic, it is important to learn from the mistakes committed to improve and prepare higher education institutions for situations such as these. This will help prevent students from facing additional challenges which they already have while being a university student. Foremost, change must begin at the federal and state level so institutions can provide students with the best resources possible. The U.S federal government should begin by expanding their funding for public higher education to provide more financial support to states and in turn higher education institutions. As well as passing legislation that supports education institutions such as the CARES Act to better prepare for future challenges. If these changes are implemented, they can have very beneficial outcomes. For example, during the initial pandemic in March 2020, the U.S congress passed the CARES Act which provided states with emergency education funding (California Department of Education). The funds were then distributed to higher education institutions which used a portion of the funds for necessary programs and provided direct financial relief to students. Funding for higher education should

not just be given during emergencies, but a continual investment. It will allow schools to invest in their infrastructure and much needed programs. This will result in students having access to more existing resources if another unprecedented event were to occur like a pandemic. The federal and state governments must both work together to ensure that higher education institutions are receiving the appropriate aid they need, especially in times of need.

Students come into closer proximity and interact more directly with the institution they attend. As this is true, higher education institutions hold a bigger responsibility in student success. Schools should begin by understanding the student population they serve taking into account student diversity. Institutions can then formulate education curriculums, resources, economic, and social assistance that is specifically aimed to help their student population. As one of the interviewees mentioned, the higher education system needs a structural change that serves its students, who are no longer predominantly White. By doing so, schools will ensure their student population feels welcomed and supported. This is especially true during unprecedented times, since certain student populations face higher education disparities due to the influence of non-academic factors such as economic hardships. Student needs and experiences should always be taken into consideration when making decisions that affect them directly.

As more information arises after the pandemic, it should be taken into consideration to help improve institutions. It provides an insight into what methods of handling the crisis worked and which did not for their students. As mentioned before, the CARES Act provided students with direct economic relief. Economic relief in the form of grants and scholarships will help mitigate the economic hardship that university students, especially Latino students encounter. Although it will not provide total financial relief, it will provide students with an additional source of income which they can use to cover necessary financial costs. The pandemic allowed

students and faculty to explore a new format of virtual learning. While it proved challenging at first, it can prove to be a valuable asset. It can be incorporated to better suit the needs of students. A remote form of learning proved to be more beneficial for some while others did not have the same experience. Some key points that the interviewees highlighted was the diversity in perspective of online learning. While some found it advantageous because they no longer had to commute and could spend more time studying, others found it very difficult to concentrate or learn. It will be interesting to see how remote learning is integrated into higher institutions. From a social standpoint, schools prioritize student support services found on campus. As was discussed earlier, students turned to student support services during the pandemic for support and relief. As a recommendation, schools should prioritize student support services as a very significant investment to the ultimate success of students (Lederer et al., 2020). Policies and investments such as these could be implemented to help university students, especially Latino students.

CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of this project was to present and share the Latino student experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Latino community is a very diverse community with people from different backgrounds, gender, immigration status, class, and nations of origin. Thus the difficulty arises in sharing problems that affect the Latino community as a whole. However, this project described some possible non-academic problems that may have impacted Latino students and their families.

It should be noted that although there is a predicted decline of Latino student retention rates, the possibility still stands that this extrapolation is incorrect. Furthermore, non-academic

factors such as economic, social, cultural, educational, and personal characteristics may influence a student's ability of academic success and retention in higher education institutions. The effects of the pandemic on students at the University of California-Riverside was also discussed. Finally, some possible policies, programs, and financial relief that can be implemented were suggested to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic on Latino students. Additional research is suggested to analyze the ultimate impact of the pandemic on Latino students for future school years.

As a Latina first generation university student myself, I wanted to share our experience of living and studying during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure our experience is considered when discussing the effects of the pandemic. I attempted to be as inclusive as possible to ensure different perspectives were considered. I do not speak on behalf of anyone but attempted to share a small fraction of what Latino students and their families faced during the pandemic. My aim is for education administrators to understand our experience and consider it when deciding how to improve the structure of higher education institutions.

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