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Title

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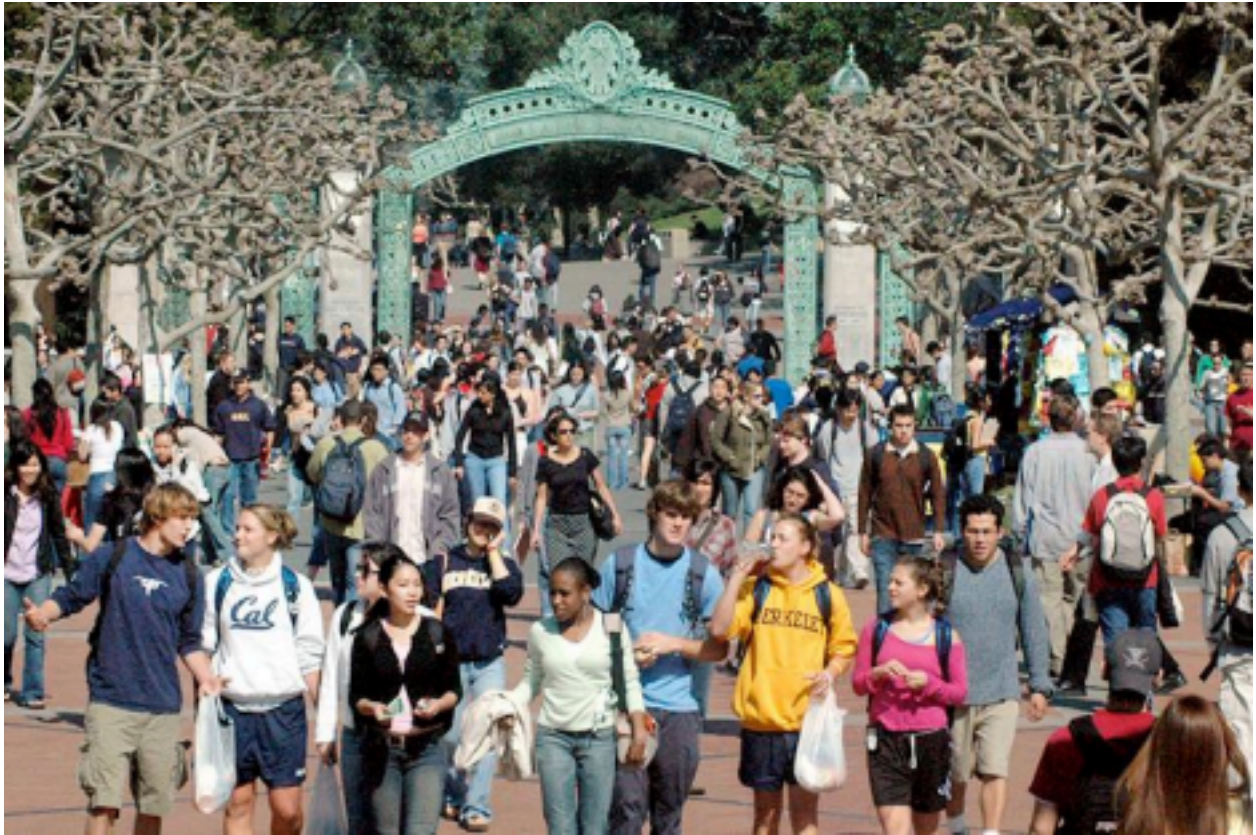
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UC Berkeley: Insight into the Experience of Latina First-Generation University Students

By Irene Fernandez



Background

Around 40% of people in California identify as Latinx.¹ Latinx identifying individuals with immigrant backgrounds have lower education levels on a national scale.² Not addressing the education gap has negative effects, such as preventing Latinxs from obtaining postsecondary degrees or an accessible path to social mobility, specifically Latinas, or women who identify as

¹ Ahn, Taemin, Hector de Leon, Misael Galdamez, Ana Oaxaca, Jie Zong, Lupe Renteria Salome, Denise Ramos-Vega, and Rocio Perez. "15 Facts about Latino Well-Being in Ca." Latino Policy & Politics Institute, October 26, 2022. <https://latino.ucla.edu/research/15-facts-latinos-california/>.

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Latinx, who are underrepresented in skilled industries. By addressing the first-generation education gap among Latina university students, a large percentage could succeed in institutions that aid in removing generational economic barriers and increasing policies representative of California's population. Thus, it is beneficial to analyze the experience of Latina first-generation students to highlight how they are supported and the challenges they face at these institutions. This research sought to understand how having a first-generation college student background influences academic performance and school involvement of Latinx identifying women at UC Berkeley from 2020 to present and how they navigate the challenges of coming from underrepresented identities in higher education.

Interviews with three Latina first-generation college students at UC Berkeley revealed the importance of counseling and mentor programs to their overall success at a four-year prestigious institution. Experiences with professors, peers, and academic grades varied across majors. All of the students interviewed identified feeling imposter syndrome at some point in their academic journey because of their first-generation college student background. However, they still felt overall pride in their identity, felt they could overcome challenges associated with their background with proper resources, and felt they belonged at Berkeley.

Academic Performance

Two students mentioned they felt their academic grades were great. Because of their first-generation background, they felt they could not turn to their parents for academic help, assistance with financial aid applications, or choosing classes, which made them seek out other resources. Two students identified struggling more in technical classes such as CS61A (Computer Science) and STAT20 (Statistics). One student, a junior, identified the Student Learning Center (SLC) as a valuable resource for her Math classes. She felt that if she spoke up during office hours to ask questions, she would "make everyone behind," so she opted for the SLC where she often went with a friend to not feel alone. A fourth-year student found great inspiration from a professor from Argentina who shared stories about his academic journey, supporting the belief that anything is possible. This made her feel more confident and comfortable in seeking help. She attributed performing better in challenging courses to attending

office hours, where she felt “professors were encouraging and willing to answer any questions.”

One student felt her grades were not the best she could have achieved and was not supported by professors in the Rhetoric department. She felt it was “hard to work with them...they don’t understand, and they’re not willing to compromise either because they only know their experience.” She mentioned this was particularly evident when things associated with her identity, like commuting or caring for family members, came up. She also shared that classmates were becoming “friends” with professors when she “never thought to talk to a professor like a friend. I always thought to talk to them like they were above me.”

Peer Interactions

Two students shared interactions with peers in classes that were negative. They could not clearly identify a motivation behind these negative interactions but felt their exclusion could have resulted from being a transfer student, a woman, or first-generation. One student shared her experience in a UGBA class where she felt ignored in a group discussion. When the group was more male-dominant or even included other woman-identifying students, she felt her thoughts were not given equal importance. Another student experienced exclusion as a transfer first-generation student when classmates were discussing their experience at Berkeley. She mentioned how they listened to freshmen talk about their experiences after two months of school but told her, “We don’t need your input,” which did not make sense to her since she had been there the same amount of time as the freshmen students. While these experiences discouraged them, they still found community outside of classes by connecting with people from similar backgrounds.

School Involvement

All three students felt like valuable members of the UC Berkeley community. They were all part of Hermanas Unidas, an affinity group for Latinx/Latina identifying students. One mentioned having a leadership role in the Latinx Business Students Association (LBSA), which helped her feel a sense of belonging on campus. Another student was a part of the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC). For all three students, counseling was a

beneficial and important aspect of receiving guidance on opportunities in the Berkeley community. Two students identified NAVCAL as one of the most important spaces they were a part of because it was designed to uplift them and help them better “navigate” UC Berkeley. In this 3-unit course, they were paired with a mentor and felt they received great knowledge about scholarships, potential internship opportunities, and resources on campus.

Policy Recommendations

Invest in Counseling

To ensure a supportive environment for all students, there should be academic counselors from different backgrounds. One student mentioned that having a counselor who was also first-generation was beneficial because she felt someone was in her corner. Having counselors from diverse backgrounds makes it so that students feel more comfortable reaching out for help.

Create a Permanent Space for Latinx Students

UC Berkeley’s Latinx Student Resource Center has faced multiple challenges. Their space has been moved around and is not permanent. It offers a supportive environment for Latinx students to study and find community. It is an integral part of ensuring Latinx students are represented on campus and have proper support to thrive academically and socially. One student shared that it is upsetting that a space for students like her is still uncertain beyond her time at UC Berkeley. A permanent space for Latinx students at UC Berkeley is necessary.

More Mentorship Programs

A problem first-generation college students face is they do not have people they can easily turn to for advice since their parents or family members did not attend college. This makes it difficult for them to find resources on campus once they get to college. Mentorship programs allow for students to talk to someone who understands their experience and can offer guidance. With these programs, they are made aware of the vast resources Berkeley offers and are introduced to a community of peers from similar backgrounds. Two Latina first-generation college students identified NAVCAL as highly beneficial, so if more students could access mentorship programs, this would enhance academic success and foster belonging among first-generation students.