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Selecting Pathways: Latinxs, Choices, and Two-year Colleges

Spencer Salas

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Mark M. D'Amico

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar

The University of California Los Angeles

Manuel S. González Canché

The University of Pennsylvania

Adam K. Atwell

Mitchell Community College

Abstract

After the choice of a two-year college, more choices follow—and individuals make those choices based on a combination of knowing why (aspirations), knowing how (gaining knowledge and skills), and knowing whom (sources of information about college and careers). In this article, we unpack the relationship between two-year college students' choices once enrolled in two-year colleges, the alignment of those choices to their projected career goals, and the sources of knowledge/knowing that inform that decision-making. Leveraging data captured from a multi-institution, multi-state administration of the College and Career Capital Survey (CCCS), we theorize the potential underestimation of Latinx students' decision-making processes for careers while in the higher education setting. Findings suggest that despite longstanding mismatching theories, it is also possible that Latinx students know or might come to know how to leverage the two-year college pathway in ways that benefit both them and the communities they represent. We conclude with implications for future research emphasizing the development of mediational tools for students' knowing as they enter postsecondary pathways and leverage their experiences to make such pathways purposeful and sustainable.

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Introduction

This report ... finds that the gap in white/Hispanic bachelor's degree completion could be substantially closed if these well-prepared Latinx youth attended the same kind of colleges as similarly prepared whites and graduated at the same rate (Fry, 2004, p. v).

Outside the student activity office at the main campus of Northern Virginia Community College [NOVA] in Annandale on a recent afternoon, students huddled around low-slung tables playing "Magic: The Gathering"...A music major from a financially comfortable Fairfax County household, Bovender plans to transfer to Virginia Commonwealth University. For now, he walks to school. "It's close and convenient," Bovender said. He gestured over his shoulder: "My house is right across the way" (de Vise, 2011).

As a starting point, we begin this article about Latinx¹ students and the choices they make within two-year colleges with a juxtaposition of contrasts. The first, an excerpt of the executive summary of a highly influential 2004 Pew Hispanic Center publication reported Fry's "selective pathways" argument. To paraphrase: "Many more Latinxs are enrolling in postsecondary education but not graduating; were qualified Latinx undergraduates to enroll in more selective institutions (as opposed to, for example, two-year colleges), they would have a better chance of completing a degree. Ergo, the community college was, institutionally, counterproductive to college-ready Latinxs' postsecondary achievement."

Seven years later, the 2011 Washington Post excerpt captured the image of a white, male, middle-class two-year community college student, jamming with his classmates in the lounge of Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale Campus with every intention of transferring with an Associate Degree to a four-year institution. In the Pew Hispanic Report, the choices Latinxs were making to attend two-year colleges were framed as misguided. In the Post article, a white middle-class male's choice to attend Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) was framed as smart.

¹ We employ "Latinx" (singular) and "Latinxs" (plural) as gender-neutral alternatives to "Latino, Latina, Latinos, Latinas."

Our intent in bringing two dissimilar representations of the value assigned to an individual's decision to attend the two-year college is to expose what has emerged as something of a continuum of choice and its relation to the capital that students leverage in making that choice. For many working for institutions historically committed to open-access/opportunity, the suggestion that two-year colleges might be flipped as vehicles for consolidating middle class privilege is implicitly contrary to the historically differentiated institutional mission of NOVA and, more broadly, the community college movement. In this article, we argue that if Bovender figured out how to leverage a local two-year college to his immediate and potentially long-term benefit, Latinxs might also figure it out and/or are already figuring it out. That is to say, where the decision to attend a two-year college falls on a continuum ranging from an unfortunate under match to middle-class savvy depends, in large part, on who is deciding and the understanding of higher education that informs that process. This article is, thus, about choice making and the ways of knowing that potentially inform the process of becoming a two-year college student and succeeding in that endeavor. Our motivation is to draw attention to and challenge the dichotomy captured above—that community colleges are logical, reasonable, and affordable pathways for white middle-class students, but not for Latinxs.

We locate the theorization that follows in our multi-site research grounded in the notion that leveraging the two-year college as a gateway to the postmodern economic workforce requires more than technical skill, content area knowledge, or simple degree attainment (see D'Amico et al., 2012; D'Amico et al., 2017; González Canché, D'Amico, Rios-Aguilar, & Salas, 2014). Boundary-less careers involve and revolve around dynamic “ways of knowing” that, in two-year college contexts, take on great import the moment an individual has enrolled in a two-year college institution (cf. Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). After the choice of a two-year college, more choices follow—and individuals make those choices based on a combination of knowing—who, why, and how to. Specifically, we unpack the relationship between two-year college students' choices once enrolled in two-year colleges, the alignment of those choices to their projected career goals, and the sources of knowledge/knowing that informed that decision-making. Turning our attention to broad comparative data gleaned from our self-identified Latinx participants versus non-Latinx participants captured from a multi-institution, multi-state administration of the College and Career Capital Survey (CCCS), we

theorize the potential underestimation of Latinx students' decision-making processes for careers while in the higher education setting. We conclude with implications for future research emphasizing the development of mediational tools for students' knowing as they enter postsecondary pathways and leverage their knowing to make such pathways purposeful and sustainable. We argue that despite longstanding mismatching theories, it is also possible that Latinx know or might come to know how to leverage the two-year college pathway in ways that benefit both them and the communities they represent.

Social Capital, Knowing, and “The Leaking Pipeline”

With George H. W. Bush's Executive Order 12729, establishing The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, Latinx educational achievement emerged as a national policy concern (<https://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative/>)—and was, subsequently, taken up by the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations. Recent analyses have reported substantial gains in terms of Latinx high school graduation and college enrollment. Today, Latinxs account for the lion's share of minoritized students in postsecondary education. Yet, Latinxs continue to disproportionately enroll in two-year colleges where often their pathways through postsecondary education end without a bachelor's degree—reinforcing longstanding “mismatch” theories such as Fry's (2004) “role of selective pathways” argument (see also Alon & Tienda, 2005; Krogstad & Fry, 2014).

In the way of a visual illustration, using National Center for Education Statistics data extracted from tables in Ifill, Radford, Wu, Cataldi, Wilson, & Hill (2016), Figure 1 shows that Latinx students are the only demographic subgroup that is more likely to enroll in a community college than a four-year institution. Additionally, Figure 2 demonstrates that Latinx students were also the least likely to enroll at a university three years later.

Despite impressive gains in Latinx high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education, the “leaking pipeline” (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004) is a disappointing outcome for those students and worrisome at the national and regional levels (see Gándara, 2012). College degrees do raise individuals' educational levels and, by consequence, their earning potential and long-term economic well-being (see, e.g., Gándara, 2010; Gurantz, Hurwitz, & Smith, 2017; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). What we also know is that important numbers of Latinx undergraduates are first-generation college-goers who, as such, face distinct

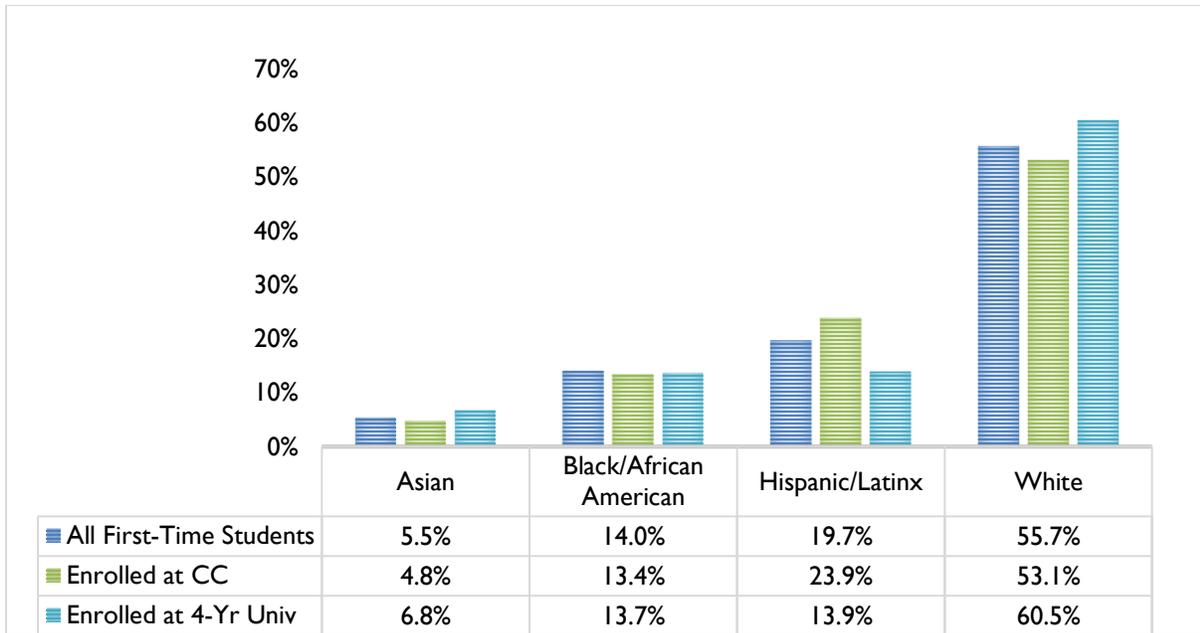


Figure 1. Enrollment distribution by sector and race/ethnicity. Data source Ifill et al. (2016).

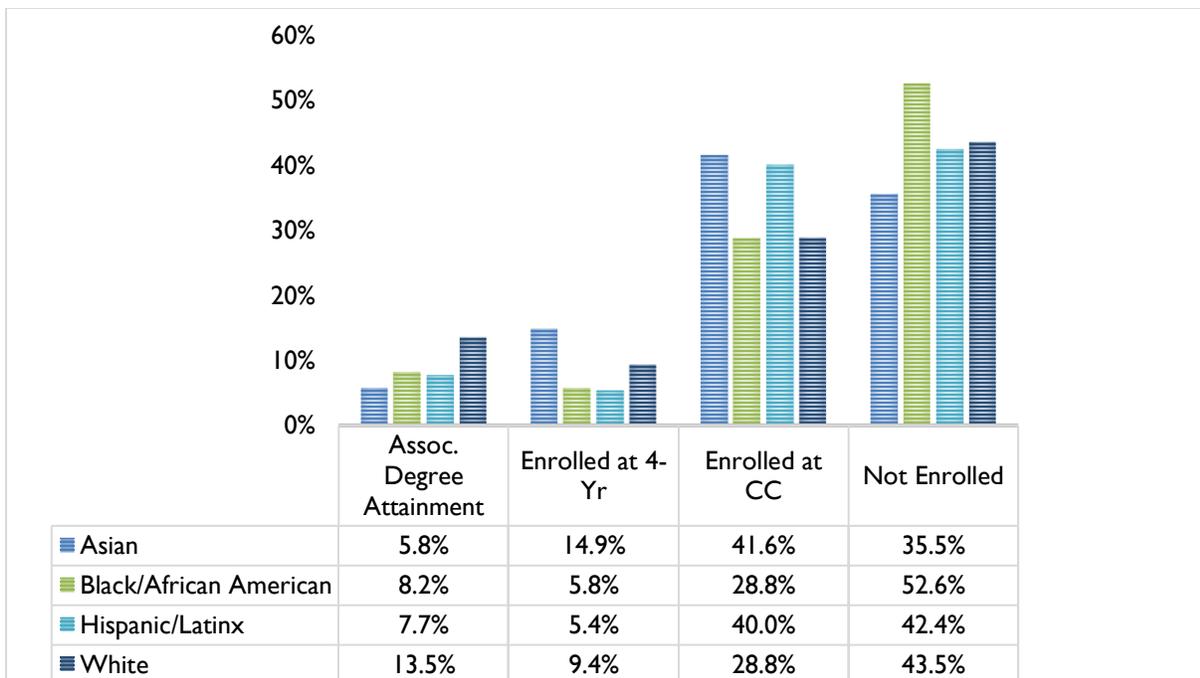


Figure 2. First-time community college students who began in 2011-12: 3-year attainment/persistence. Data source Ifill et al. (2016).

academic and psychological challenges (Piedra, Schiffner, & Reynaga-Abiko, 2011) as well as obstacles ranging from bureaucratic hurdles to limited counselor availability (see Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003), to the labyrinth of remedial, transfer, and applied degree sequences (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010).

Social Capital and Knowing

While it is beyond the scope of this article to review the many diverse strands of inquiry that have informed research for Latinxs and the two-year college, we underscore that important scholarship has emphasized Latinx two-year college students' identity development—how Latinx undergraduates “learn” to be successful and the “ways of knowing” that inform that process (see Núñez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vázquez, 2013). Robust discussions about Latinx two-year college identity development have, among other things, challenged existing deficit thinking in the field through examinations of kin/non-kin collectivism exercised by Latinxs in postsecondary education (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). Studies have also unpacked the knowledge needed for minoritized students to navigate structural and cultural dimensions of college (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003) and, even more recently, their leveraging of social media in that process (González Canché & Rios-Aguilar, 2015). Inquiry surrounding “knowing” has also focused, among other things, on the psychological and subjective experiences of Latinx community college students and their interplay with degree persistence (Zell, 2010), and how shifting demographics combined with fossilized status advantage stymie intergenerational educational immobility within Latinx communities (Alon, Domina, & Tienda, 2010).

Critically oriented inquiry has also generated specific and broad examinations about the sorts of generative “funds of knowledge” that inform Latinx postsecondary aspirations and trajectories (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018), the “academic ethic” they bring to higher education (Pino, Martinez-Ramos, & Smith, 2012), and the transfer of social capital through peer mentoring (Moschetti, Plunkett, Efrat, & Yomtov, 2017). These discussions have been accompanied by powerful counter-narratives rupturing deficit-oriented representations of smartness by recognizing and elevating the subaltern, decolonizing, hybrid intelligences that Latinxs resource in the face of institutional “whiteness” (see, e.g., Carrillo, 2013, 2016; Reyes, 2007; Rodríguez & Greer, 2017).

What it takes to succeed in two-year colleges depends on a confluence of factors—including institutionally driven variables as well as those that center on individuals. Some would argue that becoming an undergraduate is an “apprenticed” identity (see Lave & Wegner, 1991) that depends largely on a student’s accumulation of social capital and application of that social capital. Learning to be something or someone different from the identity to which we are assigned or to which we adhere is more than a question of accumulation of book learning or study/test-taking skills. Rather, entry to and full participation within a community of practice such as postsecondary education also requires deep understandings of what that specific community of practice, its values, and the social relationships that support its existence. Thus, the forms of “social capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) that students bring or do not bring to the two-year college experience and that they subsequently consolidate and grow (or not) consist of contacts and memberships that might be leveraged as resources to their benefit (cf. Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Here we underscore that our colleagues have also argued, “Educational research typically treats social capital as dichotomous, presuming students either have it or they don’t” (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012, p. 8).

Although a broad body of literature has explored why Latinxs enroll in two-year colleges (see, e.g., Kurlaender, 2006; Perez & McDonough, 2008), scholarship has been somewhat less attentive to the choices Latinx make once enrolled, the network of influence that informs those choices, and their alignment with what individual students hope to achieve in terms of careers. In short, at a certain point, we collectively found the under-match argument. The regret that “if only Latinxs didn’t go to two-year colleges” frustrates us in that the two-year college is often the only economically viable choice so many have, and because they are often pushed to do so because they are academically underprepared and/or do not receive adequate counseling (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010). Turning our focus on two-year college students’ accumulation of know-how once enrolled in two-year colleges, where those ways of knowing come from, and the relationship between their academic choices and career aspirations led to our development of a *College and Career Capital Survey (CCCS)*.

The Study

Our conceptualization of the CCCS was a collaborative exploration of the relationship between the community college experience and the capital they accumulate leading toward

careers. The CCCS was administered at seven Southeastern public community and technical colleges representing rural, suburban, and urban institutions as defined by the former Basic Carnegie Classifications (two urban, two suburban, three rural). 1,308 students completed the CCCS. The instrument was validated through a pilot study resulting in corrected items that had previously caused confusion with acknowledgement of the possible bias that may result from social desirability (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Survey questions used in this study involved demographics, items related to the alignment between college and careers, aspirations, college and career choices, and sources of information about careers. The non-random sample targeted at least 10 class sections at each institution. To ensure a mix of college transfer and career program students, a minimum of the following class sections were surveyed at each institution: 3 first-semester college-level English sections, 3 developmental English sections, 2 career program course sections, and 2 college transfer course sections in disciplines other than English.

Of the 1,308 participating students, 83 self-identified as Latinx. The Latinx students in our sample indicated the following demographics and background characteristics: 59% had attended for one year or less; 58% were female; the average age was 23; and, 60% spoke English as their first language. In terms of employment (hours worked per week): 28% ≤ 20 hours; 36% > 20 hours; 36% were not working; 6% were or had served in the U.S. military. Approximately 19% had completed some college or a degree prior to community college enrollment. In terms of cumulative college GPA, 70% had a cumulative college GPA above 3.0. Finally, in terms of developmental course(s) required: 44% English; 11% ESL; 3% Reading; and 56% Math.

As a preface, we note that in previous examinations we employed analyses with pilot data to refine our understandings of college-career alignment and rank sources of information regarding college-going decisions and future career fields across respondents (D'Amico, Rios-Aguilar, Salas, & González Canché, 2012). Likewise, our collaborations have discussed the larger data set in the context of the shifting geographies of educational opportunity in the "New Latino South"—recent, high density, Latinx population centers that have spread across Georgia and the Carolinas (D'Amico, Salas, González Canché, & Rios Aguilar, 2017). Although we had examined both the pilot data and that of the later expanded survey, we had yet to compare more broadly and descriptively the Latinx participants' responses to the entire sample of participants. In the section that follows, we present those comparisons with the intent of

describing Latinx participants' knowing in relation to their postsecondary choices and projected career trajectories.

In terms of method, Figures 3 and 4 were the result of the survey data administered on site to students across the participating institutions. The paper survey consisted of 30 questions of which all but three questions were Likert type. The remaining questions were a combination of select one choice or select all that apply. Question constructs were built on the notion of College and Career Capital. CCC is founded on students' know-how once enrolled in two-year colleges, sources of ways of knowing, and the relationship between their academic choices (e.g., reasons for attending a community/technical college, previous education attainment before enrollment) and career aspirations as depicted by previous work experience and local labor market opportunities.

The handwritten responses were then entered manually into a data management system and re-checked for accuracy. These figures were generated using statistical software whereby we calculated frequency distributions of the values presented. Data from the frequency distributions were converted to images using data management software. Thus, these analyses are descriptive in nature and do not intend to make inferences. The comparisons presented in this study are classified as cross-tabulations between categorical variables. Although this cross-tabulation could have been extended to chi-squared comparisons to test for independence between the categories of interest, we refrained from any attempt to make inferential claims. Instead, we proceeded to present the descriptive results as shown in Figures 3 and 4. In the cross-tabulation analysis we created two categories for ethnicity: (self-identified) Latinx and the remaining participants not self-selecting as Latinx. The rest of the categories shown in Figure 3 were configured by students' self-identified reasons to attend a community or technical college in two groups. Specifically, students could add a value from 1 to 4 for the importance they attributed to each reason. The options were as follows: 1=no importance at all, 2=little importance, 3=fair amount of importance, and 4=a lot of importance. The categories presented in Figure 3 aggregate options 3 and 4 into a single category. From this viewpoint, the bivariate nature of the comparison arises from comparing the proportion of Latinxs who selected a given reason as important versus the proportion of everyone else who also selected that same reason with the same level of importance (options 3 and 4). A similar rationale was followed to construct Figure 4, wherein the categories of interest were students' self-identified sources of

career information. These students' responses were also aggregated for options 3 and 4. In addition, we compiled and analyzed participants' optional open-ended responses to "What else would you like to tell us about your college and career experience?" Some responses are included in the following section for illustrative purposes.

Findings

The results of the present study focused on the comparisons between Latinx and non-Latinx participants to highlight some key differences between the two that describe the Latinx experience. First are some overall perspectives about the community college experience and career prospects following completion. The Latinx students were somewhat less likely to believe there would be local jobs for them upon graduation (82% as compared with 87% for the non-Latinx sub-sample). There were some positive perspectives regarding aspirations, however. Greater percentages of Latinx students aspired to transfer to a four-year institution (66% compared with 54%) and were more likely to have increased aspirations since enrolling in the community college (61% compared with 57%). One student added the note at the bottom of the survey: "It has showed me responsibility and that life isn't all fun games, you need to get your education and find a good career."

Second, we asked respondents to indicate the influences for choosing a community college (Figure 3). While there was great consistency when comparing the Latinx subgroup to the entire sample, two notable differences were that Latinx students see community college as a vehicle for transfer (88% compared with 77%) and that they see community college as the *only* option for a higher education trajectory (38% compared with 24%). While there were few observed differences, it is important to note the focus on career preparation and affordability for all surveyed community college students. Cost can be a significant barrier to completion, as noted by one Latinx student: "I just wish I didn't have to work 35 hours a week to take care of myself, and that I could focus more on school to get where I want to be. I don't know if I can reach my educational goals because I don't have the time or money."

Third, participants indicated the sources they used for career information (Figure 4). The Latinx subgroup was similar to the entire sample on some of the sources (e.g., college instructor, advisor, friend); however, there were notable differences as a smaller percentage of Latinx students relied on family sources while a larger percentage relied on employers,

classmates, social networking websites, career surveys, and community/church groups. Additionally, while there were not differences, college instructors were a source of information for nearly two-thirds of Latinx students (the most prevalent source in our study). One student commented, “The instructors at [college name removed] care about the wellbeing of students. They not only teach but also advise the students.”

Discussion

For the purposes of this article, we limit our discussion to two primary, yet multifaceted conceptualizations: (1) Latinx students' decision to attend community colleges, transfer goals, and related aspirations and (2) the sources of information that contribute to career decisions.

We know from Figures 1 and 2 that Latinx students are more likely to attend a community college and less likely to transfer within three years (Ifill et al., 2016). As noted previously, this may perpetuate the negative perspectives around this important subgroup beginning their education in the two-year sector (e.g., Fry, 2004). Still, the data reflect some of the realities of modern-day college going. For example, community colleges are an important and affordable option, and cost is a factor for many Latinx students (O'Connor, Hammack, & Scott, 2010). The results from the present study show that affordability is one of the primary choice drivers for both the Latinx students as well as the rest of the sample, which includes the first-generation population as well as students from backgrounds that perhaps present greater economic stability and college and career knowledge as described in the introduction of this article.

Community college choice becomes a problem when aspirations do not align with results. We learned from this study that transfer is a greater focus for the Latinx subgroup than the overall sample, which is connected with affordability and the perspective that community college is the only college option. So, it is critically important that colleges do all they can to ensure successful transfer. Again, looking at the national data in Figure 2, it appears that despite the transfer intent uncovered in this study, Latinx students are not transferring at a rate that keeps pace with Asian and white students. However, the data also show that Latinx students are more likely to continue enrollment in the community college than African American and white students are. Consequently, there may be factors, such as affordability that are leading the Latinx students to persist in the community college as long as possible before transferring.

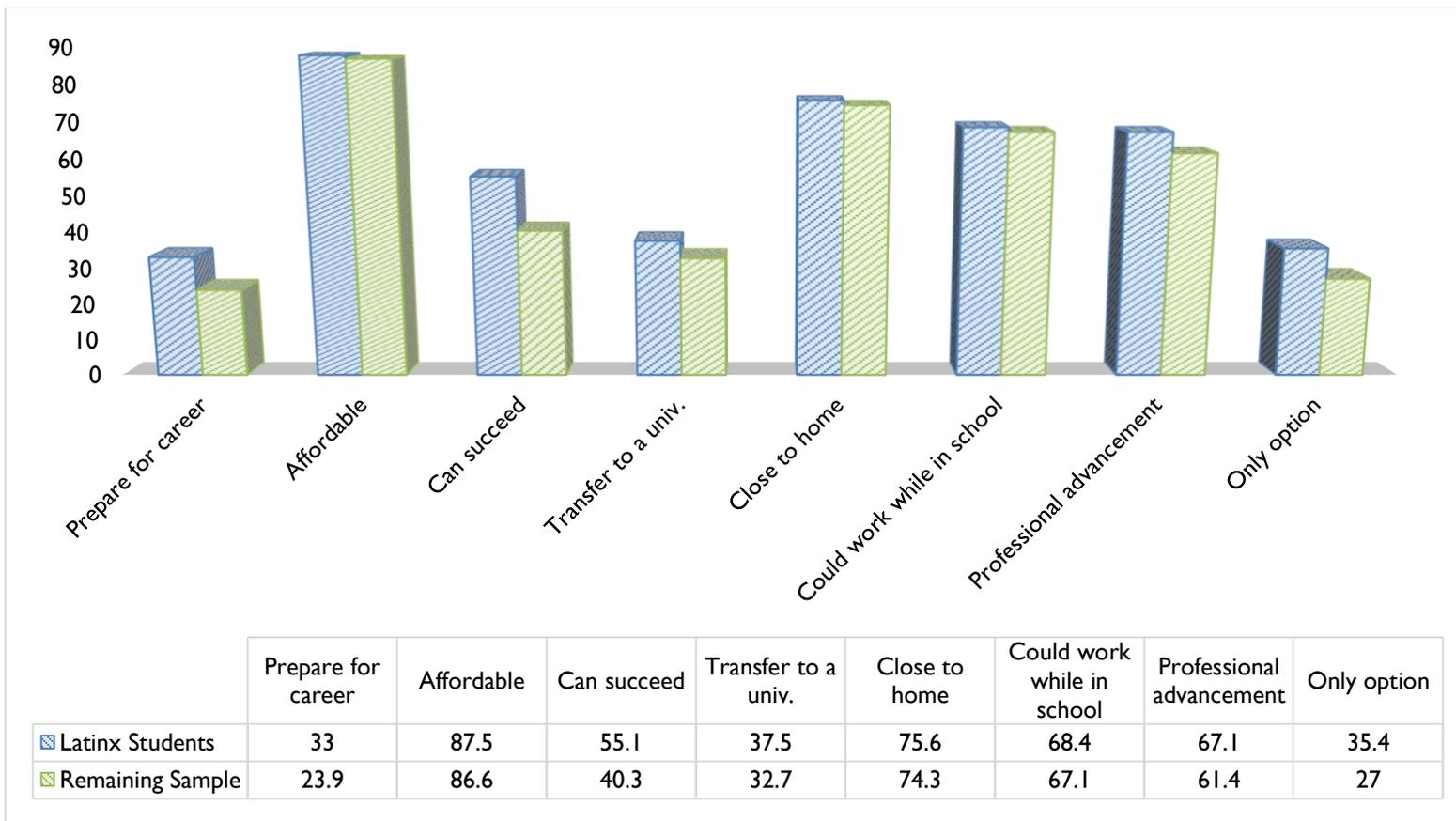


Figure 3. Reasons for attending community college.

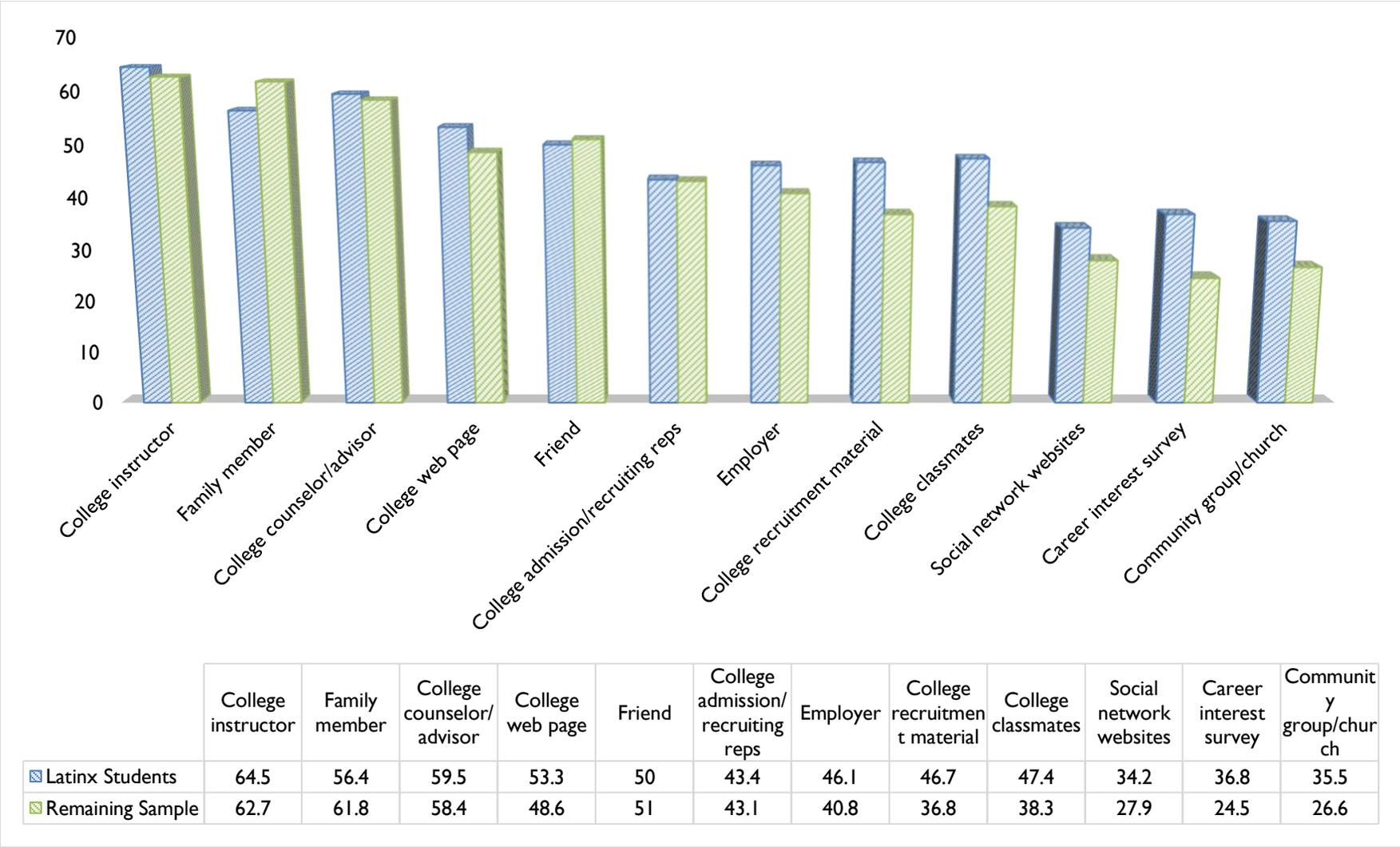


Figure 4. Sources of career information.

Additionally, in our study, we uncover an important outcome that more than half of Latinx students have increased educational aspirations since enrolling in the community college. Aspirations have been connected with student success (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2007; Bers & Smith, 1991).

The second important piece of our study is in relation to sources of information about careers and the differences between the Latinx subgroup and the full sample. Notable in our findings is that family was a less prominent a source for Latinx students than for the full sample; however, that is not necessarily surprising if we consider that many students in the subgroup are first-generation American and/or first-generation college students and families may not have as robust of a postsecondary background as some other demographic groups. In these instances, it is critical for colleges to work with students whose families do not have as much college experience (Baber, 2014; Nomi, 2005). While college instructor is the most prevalent source of career information, the greatest difference we see is about community-based resources. To that end, when considering how to inform the career decisions and enhance the career knowledge of the Latinx community in community colleges, the roles of employers, college classmates, career interest surveys, church and community groups, and social networking sites are viable options. This also shows that this population is perhaps more receptive to these alternative sources of career information than other demographic groups. Moreover, when considering the building of Latinx community college student social capital and the ensemble of contacts and memberships that might be leveraged as resources to their benefit (cf. Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012), our findings suggest the potential of differentiated, purposeful, and institutionally driven academic and career counseling. For example, counseling aimed at mentoring Latinx students toward successful transfer and/or career opportunities might begin with a mindfulness of the experiences of working students and how such experiences might be used to grow college and career aspirations. Additionally, community networks, which were more important to the Latinx sample, can be leveraged as opportunities to enhance knowledge of and pathways toward careers.

Conclusion

We began this article with the contrast of an excerpt of Fry's (2004) highly influential "selective pathways" argument with the image of a white, middle-class two-year community college student, Bovender, jamming with his classmates in the lounge of Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale Campus. The picture of a millennial music major waiting it out through an associate's degree with every intention of transferring to a four-year institution—but, we imagine, with far less student debt (if any) and all of the creature comforts of his parent's four-bedroom ranch "just across the way"—challenges our professional subjectivities. Bovender is a synecdoche for a middle class for whom affordability, access, and broad options through the community college are such that community colleges are becoming institutions of first choice. This is also true for Latinx students for whom, as Martinez and Fernandez (2004) explained, "Community colleges occupy a unique position in higher education as sites for mining the social and cultural capital needed for upward social and economic mobility in the United States" (p. 51).

In this article, we have extended our related discussions surrounding the evolution of our research around dynamic "ways of knowing." We have argued the potential underestimation of Latinx students' capital acquisition in discussions surrounding the "role of selective pathways"—an important paradigm that nevertheless cedes the possibility that Latinxs too might come to know how to in ways that align their choice to attend two-year colleges, the choices they make once enrolled, and the career trajectories to which they aspire.

Perhaps what we might have to be more willing to accept as individuals and as a discipline is that while the role of the community college has historically been to serve the community, increasingly, students such as Bovender are serving themselves strategically and purposefully to the two-year college in ways that we had not previously imagined. While the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, for example, characterizes "Career & College Promise" (dual enrollment) programming as "a viable option for students who may believe that the cost puts college out of reach for them" (see <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/advancedlearning/ccp/?&print=true>), families and individuals who see such programs as the best bang for their taxpayer buck are also leveraging "early college" programming to their perceived benefit. There is, we argue, absolutely nothing wrong with that—and we too are left wondering what we

would have chosen should such options have existed for us when we were in high school—and what options we will choose for our school-aged children.

What we have hoped to question is the sustainability of the argument that otherwise qualified Latinx students should enroll in more selective institutions and not two-year colleges. Our hope is that future discussions will move past the very important notion of “selective pathways” toward understanding the development of individual student choice-making and the social capital that informs those decisions (especially that of minoritized students). Finally, we hope that the ways of knowing, through which Latinxs and others enter the two-year college might be understood, leveraged, and cultivated as mediational tools for more students so that the pathways they select are ones that lead them and the country forward.

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