

# Voces que importan: A systematic literature review of the experiences of Latinx community college transfer students

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## ABSTRACT

Latinx students often enroll in community colleges as a pathway to transfer to four-year institutions and earn their bachelor's degrees. However, data reflects disparate rates at which Latinx community college students are transferring to four-year institutions. In this systematic literature review, I use a thematic analysis approach to identify and synthesize common challenges and barriers faced by Latinx community college transfer students. Specifically, I focus on the experiences of these students during their time at community college and after they transfer to a four-year institution. The findings reveal that students experienced nonacademic, academic, and institutional challenges and highlight the need for equity driven programs, policies, and practices that can help foster success among Latinx community college transfer students at both the sending and receiving institutions. Additionally, this systematic literature review on the transfer experiences of Latinx community college students reveals recommendations that will better support their ability to navigate within these spaces. This review concludes by acknowledging the need for more on-going research that values the unique experiences of Latinx community college transfer students so that researchers may continue to provide accurate and impactful recommendations to community college and four-year institution leaders and policy makers to improve transfer rates and degree attainment.

**KEYWORDS:** systematic literature review, Latinx transfer students, community college, challenges and barriers, Latinx student experiences

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## INTRODUCTION

Latinx<sup>1</sup> students represent a growing part of the U.S. college student population, with over 60% of first time Latinx students choosing to enroll at a community college (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). Community colleges have played a significant role in providing access to higher education for Latinx students and the ability to transfer to a four-year institution to attain a bachelor's degree (Cohen et al., 2013; Martinez et al., 2017). Although the data is showing high enrollments of Latinx students through the community college system, only 13% transfer successfully and complete a bachelor's degree (Velasco et al., 2024).

This disparity raises questions about the challenges and barriers that Latinx students face throughout the transfer process. Prior research suggests that Latinx community college transfer students experience challenges such as financial struggles, family responsibilities, and work commitments (Carales, 2020; Solis & Durán, 2022). Once at a four-year institution, Latinx community college transfer students often face difficulties acclimating to their receiving institutions (Del Real Viramontes, 2020; Solis & Durán, 2022; Vega, 2017). Despite these known challenges, the gap reflected by the percentages of Latinx students enrolling to a community college and those that are transferring and attaining a bachelor's degree, underscores the need for further study. The purpose of this systematic literature review is to produce an up-to-date summary that focuses on the experiences of Latinx community college transfer students by using a thematic analysis to address the following question:

1. What does the literature tell us about the challenges and barriers that Latinx community college transfer students face during the pre- and post-transfer process?

This systematic review of existing research on the transfer experiences of Latinx community college students examines the challenges and barriers they face through a thematic analysis to highlight both systemic obstacles and lived experiences. These stories are vital, as each reflects a unique

perspective. The findings show that these obstacles occur both before students transfer to a four-year institution (pre-transfer) and after they have made the transition (post-transfer). To address these issues, community colleges must develop Transfer Sending Cultures (TSC), while universities must build Transfer Receptive Cultures (TRC) (Jain et al., 2011). These frameworks emphasize the shared responsibility between institutions, shifting the burden away from students, so that their transfer journey is not treated as their sole responsibility and recognizes the challenges and barriers that impact their success. The goal of this systematic literature review is to provide researchers, educators, policymakers, and higher education leaders with insights that can help create meaningful changes to better support Latinx community college transfer students.

## METHODOLOGY

A rapidly growing amount of research is being done that focuses on identifying ways to help Latinx students succeed academically (Crisp et al., 2015). This can make it difficult to stay up to date with the latest findings and evaluate all the information, which is why using systematic literature review as a method can be of value (Snyder, 2019). Using this method will help to assess and synthesize findings, find gaps in the literature, and highlights recommendations that can still be implemented to improve the success of Latinx community college transfer students who pursue a bachelor's degree. This study followed Petticrew and Roberts' (2006) method of review, which included developing a research question, selecting databases and search terms, formulating search criteria, assessing the study quality, and withdrawing data from the articles to answer the research question. Following these steps ensured a structured review process.

### Search Procedure

To locate relevant studies, three electronic databases were searched: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, and Education Resource Information Center (ERIC). The initial search began using a combination of the following key search terms and were entered using Boolean operators:

**1).** In this study I use the term Latinx as a gender-neutral term to include male, female, transgender, gender queer and those who do not identify with the gender binary who racially or ethnically identify as descendants of Latin America. The use of this term aims to reflect inclusivity and awareness.

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line one, “community college students;” line two, AND “transfer OR transfer process;” line three, AND “Latinx OR Latina/o;” line four, OR “Hispanic OR Mexican;” line five, AND “student experiences OR student narratives;” line six, AND “qualitative research OR qualitative study.” The following filters were also selected: full text, peer reviewed, and a publication date between the years 2015 and 2025. This generated a total of 46 articles on Academic Search Complete, 42 articles on Education Source, and 90 on ERIC. A title and abstract screening was conducted, which identified three relevant studies, with a particular focus on narratives or experiences of Latinx community college transfer students. In addition to searching academic databases, the reference lists of selected studies were also examined to identify five additional articles that met the inclusion criteria.

## Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were used to select the empirical studies analyzed in this review. Studies included in the review focused on Latinx community college transfer students and their experiences of the transfer process. Articles were required to use qualitative research methods to look at narrative descriptive data, case studies, or interviews as they provide in-depth insights into student experiences and highlight student voices. Some studies focused on specific student identities, such as Mexican or Mexican American, undocumented students, and Latinx immigrant-origin students. While these groups were not always the primary focus of the study, they were included due to their relevance in understanding the broader Latinx community college transfer experience. Studies were excluded if they did not specifically analyze the Latinx community college student experience. Literature reviews, policy briefs, magazine articles, conceptual pieces, and unpublished theses or dissertations were not considered, as these sources had not undergone a peer-review process to ensure validity.

## Positionality Statement

As a Latina student who has spent a prolonged period trying to navigate from community college to a four-year institution, I have experienced first-hand some of the challenges that present themselves when choosing this pathway. My experiences as a first-generation college transfer student have brought me to address the questions proposed

in this study. Being a Latina scholar influences how I search, analyze, and interpret research by bringing the awareness and sensitivity needed to empathize and understand the experiences of those with similar backgrounds. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that my perspective is shaped by my personal journey. By reflecting on my positionality, I aim to remain vigilant against biases so that I approach my research critically.

## FINDINGS

By using a thematic analysis approach, I was able to identify, analyze, and interpret common findings (Suri & Clark, 2009) and patterns across different literature research. Using an Excel spreadsheet, the articles were organized manually in alphabetical order by author last name, publication date, research method, frameworks, and challenges and barriers. Through this organization, the three overarching themes that emerged from the challenges and barriers that Latinx community college transfer students faced were non-academic, academic, and institutional. Non-academic challenges include personal, social, and financial obstacles that affect students outside the classroom. Academic challenges involve difficulties with coursework and academic performance, while institutional barriers stem from policies, structures, or limited resources that hinder student progress. This review found that Latinx students face all three types of challenges during both the pre-transfer and post-transfer phases.

### Pre-transfer Students

#### Non-academic Challenges

Latinx community college students often share financial responsibilities among their immediate families, have dependents or care for loved ones, and have to work to fund their own education (Del Real Viramontes 2020;2023; Solis & Duran, 2022; Vega, 2017). In Sanches and Morgan’s (2022) study, a qualitative approach of transcendental phenomenology was used to explore academic resilience in the transfer process for Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students. The findings revealed the struggle that a first-generation Mexican American student, Salma experiences, “I guess, like, one of the biggest challenges is like keeping like motivated ...because, like I

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said it's hard to do it when there's no one that has done it..." (Sanches & Morgan, 2022, p 416). It can become difficult for students like Salma to understand the processes, expectations, and long-term rewards of staying committed to academic goals. This absence of support can lead to feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt which directly impact a student's motivation and persistence. Nine out of the eleven participants in Sanches and Morgan's (2022) study that identified as first-generation students expressed the difficulties of navigating higher education without family guidance.

## Academic Challenges

Struggles with developmental education was not only a challenge common among Latinx students, but it increases their risk of stopping out or of prolonging their stay at the community college (Del Real Viramontes, 2023; Murillo, 2024). Developmental education courses are supplemental courses that are designed to prepare students to succeed in math and English college-level courses (CCRC, n.d.). This process can be time-consuming and present itself as a potential barrier if not paired with proper support. Academic invalidation from instructors lowers confidence, (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015) discourages students from engaging, and potentially impacts their performance in the course. A qualitative study by Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015) examined how Latinx community college students navigated their academic experiences and the impact of instructor interactions on their self-confidence. Denise, a student enrolled in a developmental math course, shared how her professor's demeaning teaching style and deficit-based perspective made her feel academically inadequate. "[My] math teacher is not so great. She's not approachable, she kind of makes fun of you, dumbs you down, makes you feel dumb . . . This one girl asked, 'Can you show me something on the calculator?' and she's like, 'It's right there. You can't see it?'—in front of the whole class. I never ask her any questions" (Acevedo-Gil, 2015, p 110). Denise's experience highlights how negative instructor behavior and deficit-based teaching practices can damage a student's academic self-confidence. Her reluctance to ask questions, due to fear of public humiliation, reveals how such classroom dynamics can create a hostile learning environment, which can be detrimental to student engagement and academic success.

## Institutional Barriers

An institutional barrier that Latinx community college students confronted during the pre-transfer process was inadequate academic advising (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Solis & Duran, 2022; Murillo, 2024). This impacted students by limiting their awareness of transfer opportunities and providing insufficient information about available resources. The lack of clear transfer pathways makes it difficult for students to know which community college credits will transfer and count toward their degree (Murillo, 2024; Solis & Duran, 2022; Vega, 2017). As a result, many transfer students are left without proper guidance on course selection, major requirements, and even which institution to transfer to. A qualitative study by Castro & Cortez (2017) intended to understand how Mexican students made meaning of their transfer experiences using semi structured interviews. They interviewed Carola, a student who decided not to apply to UCLA because the price was "kind of scary," as she did not have the financial literacy to navigate through the financial aid process and even admitted to the interviewer that as a junior at a CSU, she was still unaware about financial aid issues. Carola's decision not to apply to UCLA due to financial concerns highlights how limited access to financial aid information and advising can affect a student's confidence navigating the transfer process. This type of support can potentially shape a student's transfer choices, even when they are qualified, and can lead to missed opportunities.

## Post-Transfer Students

### Non-Academic Challenges

Non-academic challenges that persisted after students transferred were feelings of isolation, and transfer shock (Solis & Duran, 2022; Vega 2017). Being that transfer students are coming into a new educational environment at the four-year institution, feelings of isolation were common among the Latinx community transfer students. In the ethnographic case study by Solis and Duran (2022), the authors examine how 16 Latinx community college students experience the transition to a four-year institution. Leonardo, one of the 16 participants in the study explained, "...everything is thrown at you super-fast paced like, a giant school compared to your community college, you live away from family, you don't know anyone here so if you don't get

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involved with something you kind of fail” (Solis & Duran, 2022, p 60). In the same study, students like Juan explained how coming in as transfer students made it difficult to make friends because students who had come in as freshmen had already formed those bonds. This led to Juan just feeling more alone and accepting he had to learn to do things alone (Solis & Duran, 2022, p 55). Sam, an older student, shares “...my age makes it difficult sometimes interacting with younger students...sometimes I feel like an outsider among my peers...because of the generation gap” (Castro & Cortez, 2017, p 87). These narratives underscore the need for four-year institutions to intentionally create inclusive and affirming spaces for transfer students to connect with peers, mentors, and student organizations.

## Academic Challenges

Latinx transfer students frequently encounter a more rigorous academic environment with heightened expectations and fast paced quarters, compared to the semester system they are used to, leading to difficulties in maintaining a GPA and course completion. Karla (pseudonym), a participant in Solis & Duran’s (2022) case study, shared how difficult it was to adjust to a ten-week quarter system and the impact it had on her grades. This reflects how the lack of preparation for the faster pace and heavier workload at a university can lead to academic setbacks, especially when these expectations aren’t clearly explained during the transfer process.

## Institutional Barriers

The findings reveal that receiving institutions are not providing enough support to students who are transitioning from the community college to a four-year school. In the qualitative case study done by Del Real Viramontes (2020) findings show how a lack of adequate financial resources impact students. Lucia, a first-year transfer student shares, “...If I wouldn’t have worked three jobs during the summer, then I really wouldn’t have had another option but to work a few jobs to be able to pay the bills because what TSU provided or what was left after tuition wasn’t as much.” Limited financial aid and institutional support at a four-year university can place a heavy burden on Latinx transfer students and can threaten their academic performance and overall well-being. Her need to work multiple jobs and rely on family support shows the institution’s failure to provide a transfer experience that students can manage and succeed

in. Without adequate funding and campus resources students are left to carry the weight of financial stress alone, which can affect their ability to fully engage in coursework or build campus connections.

## DISCUSSION

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This literature review looked at the challenges and barriers that Latinx community college students faced during the pre- and post-transfer process. With high Latinx student enrollment and low bachelor’s degree attainment, multiple factors including pre- and post-transfer non-academic challenges, academic challenges, and institutional barriers impact the trajectory of a student’s academic journey. Valuable recommendations from prior research often reflect improving transfer student support (Acevedo et al., 2015; Del Real Viramontes, 2020; Castro & Cortez, 2017) increasing access to institutional resources (Sanchez & Morgan, 2022; Solis & Duran, 2022), implementing support groups (Sanchez & Morgan, 2022), offering counseling, and individualized college and career planning (Acevedo et al., 2015; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022).

## Interpretation of Results

As previously mentioned, the three emerging themes that were present in students’ pre- and post-transfer experience were non-academic challenges, academic challenges, and institutional barriers. To provide adequate support to Latinx community college transfer students, sending and receiving institutions should unify their processes to ensure student success at both phases of the transfer process. Most participants across the different literature identified as first-generation college students, which significantly shaped their educational experiences and the challenges they encountered. This shared identity often influenced how they navigated academic systems, sought support, and balanced personal responsibilities. Many participants expressed feelings of isolation or uncertainty due to being the first in their families to pursue higher education (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Castro & Cortez, 2017; Del Real Viramontes, 2020; Sanchez & Morgan, 2022). For instance, participants described struggling to access financial support and resources, understand institutional processes, and advocate for themselves without prior examples or guidance from family

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members. This pattern suggests that being a first-generation student is not only a demographic marker, but also a critical factor that informs how students engage with the college environment. Students not only experience challenges and barriers navigating unfamiliar territory when starting at community college, but also they endure this a second time once they transfer and have to navigate unfamiliar territory at their four-year institution. They are already starting at a disadvantage, yet their increasing presence highlights their persistence and determination. While students bring cultural and social capital from their families, upbringing, and communities, institutional support remains essential. By valuing these strengths and incorporating them into academic programs and support services, schools can help students succeed and feel more included in these academic spaces.

## Recommendations for Future Research

While this review provides valuable insight into the experiences of Latinx transfer students, with a majority being first-generation students, future research should expand its focus to include LGBTQ Latinx students, undocumented students, and other Latinx non-traditional student populations, such as student parents, re-entry students, students with disabilities, veteran students, foster-youth students, and formerly incarcerated individuals. These students often face intersecting challenges related to time, financial constraints, mental health, and systemic barriers that are different from those of traditional students. Theoretical frameworks such as Critical Race Theory, Transfer Receptive Culture, Intersectionality, and Community Cultural Wealth were commonly used across the literature to highlight Latinx transfer student experiences. Additional frameworks that could further enrich this research include Chicana Feminist Epistemology, LatCrit, and Queer Theory, as they offer important perspectives for understanding the diverse and intersectional identities within the Latinx student community.

Institutions can implement effective strategies to improve degree attainment among Latinx community college transfer students by developing well-recognized and structured transfer programs that are supported at both community colleges and four-year institutions. It is critical that these transfer programs are created in way that are tailored to each student's academic and career goals. A key strategy is

to expand academic advising and institutional support by hiring more advisors, faculty, and institutional agents to provide students with a consistent support team throughout their transfer journey. Additionally, institutions must ensure that students receive accurate and transparent information about university expectations, helping them manage their academic workload while balancing their mental and physical well-being. Transfer support programs established at community colleges should seamlessly carry over to four-year institutions, ensuring continuity, fostering a cohort-based community, and offering a sense of security in a new educational environment. By bridging the community colleges and four-year institutions we can create a clearer and more supportive pathway for Latinx community college transfer students to increase degree attainment and academic success.

## CONCLUSION

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College is meant to be a rigorous and challenging experience, but it should also provide opportunities for growth rather than serve as a roadblock in a student's academic journey. Institutions must ensure that Latinx transfer students are given the support they need to persist and thrive, rather than navigate through obstacles on their own. Institutional leaders, policymakers, and practitioners should continue working toward creating and sustaining asset-based initiatives that center on empowering Latinx students and provide clear pathways for degree completion. This includes ensuring that community colleges cultivate strong transfer-sending cultures and fostering transfer-receptive cultures at four-year institutions than in other concentrations, suggesting that crowding may interfere with the spectrometer signals.

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