

Income gap between whites, Latinos has grown at four-year colleges

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Over the past three decades, the income disparity between Latino and non-Hispanic white students entering four-year colleges and universities has increased fourfold, with the difference in median household income growing from \$7,986 in 1975 to \$32,965 in 2006, according to a new UCLA report on Latino college students.

And while the median Latino household income had increased slightly in proportional terms by 2006, narrowing the gap by 5 percentage points, Latino households still earned only 62 cents on the dollar relative to median non-Hispanic white households.

"Even though Latinos had a slight increase in minimizing the racial income gap, the central tendency of the gap remains fairly large over this three-decade-long period," said UCLA assistant professor of education José Luis Santos, an expert on economic issues in higher education and co-author of the report. "It is not surprising that adequate financial support remains critical to both college choice and persistence for Latinos."

One in five Latino freshmen expressed major concern about the ability to finance college at the start of the school year in 2006, compared with only 8.6 percent of non-Hispanic white freshmen. While a majority of white students (60.2 percent) expressed at least some concern about their ability to finance college, Latinos were more likely to do so; of all Latino ethnic groups, Mexican American/Chicano students were the most likely (79.9 percent) to express concern. The report also shows that financial

assistance was among the top factors influencing Latino freshmen in their choice of a four-year college or university.

National data for "Advancing in Higher Education: A Portrait of Latino College Freshmen at Four-Year Institutions, 1975–2006," came from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) annual Freshman Survey, administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. The CIRP data were reported by gender and by specific Latino ethnic-origin groups — including categories for Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican and Other Latino — thereby highlighting population diversity unavailable in other national reports on Hispanic college students.

"We actually began monitoring specific Latino ethnic groups in 1971, which predates federal data collection on Hispanic students," said UCLA professor of education Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute and a report co-author.

The report also reveals a troubling trend. Even as the number of Latino students entering four-year institutions has increased, the proportion of Latino males to females decreased dramatically. Latino men constituted 57.4 percent of Latino freshmen in 1975, but only 39 percent by 2006. Although this is confirmed by other national data sources, the UCLA report reveals that Mexican American/Chicano males experienced a more rapid decline than Puerto Rican and other Latino males.

"The gender gap in educational attainment across most racial/ethnic groups has been growing in recent years, but this gap for Latinos has been understudied," said report co-author Victor B. Sáenz, an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. "There is little research that explains why these gender gaps are growing among Latino students and even less about what this gap could portend in light of the fast-growing nature of this population. Bottom

line, these results help identify a problem that represents an area in dire need of more research."

In other key findings, Latino freshmen demonstrate a strong drive to achieve relative to non-Hispanic white students and in recent years have surpassed other peer groups in these self-ratings. They are also likely to report higher degree aspirations than their peers. In most years, a higher proportion of male and female Latinos report spending six or more hours a week on studying or homework in high school than gender groups of other ethnicities. By 2006, Latinas kept pace with female whites (38 and 37 percent, respectively), and both female groups spent more time studying or doing homework in high school than Latino males (28.8 percent) or white males (25 percent). Latinos work hard to make the grade, perhaps because of the challenges they face or the general belief that hard work leads to success, the report authors said.

"These findings serve to counter the myth that college-bound Latinos lack the effort, preparation or academic motivation to succeed in college," Sáenz said. "Quite the contrary, these results suggest that Latino college-bound students are among the most driven and motivated to achieve, a finding which puts the focus back on colleges, who need to better cultivate those initial predispositions among their entering Latino students."

Although the population of Latino non-citizen or English-language learners is not increasing in representation at four-year colleges and universities, those freshmen in the "Other Latino" category are twice as likely as Mexican Americans/Chicanos to state they are not citizens, and they are more likely to report that English is not their native language (35.3 percent), compared with Mexican American/Chicano students (31 percent) and Puerto Rican students (16.2 percent). Legal status was not asked on the survey.

Although well over 90 percent of Latinos and non-Hispanic whites have now achieved the recommended years of high school preparation in English, mathematics and foreign language study set by the National Commission on Educational Excellence in 1982, fewer Latinos students than whites report having taken the recommended two years of physical science (56.5 percent and 61.4 percent, respectively), and both groups have a way to go to meet biological science course recommendations (completed by 45.3 percent and 46.8 percent, respectively).

As competition for admission to four-year institutions has increased for all students, the percentage of Latinos reporting they are attending their first-choice institution has seen a 27 percent relative decrease, compared with a 10 percent relative decrease for whites. There is a related trend of increases in college application rates. In 1975, 14.1 percent of Latinos and 6 percent of whites reported applying to five or more colleges in addition to the one they ultimately attended. In 2006, 34.8 percent of Latinos and 23 percent of whites reported doing so.

"Latinos at four-year colleges got the message and are applying to more schools, although fewer now state they are attending their first-choice institution," Santos said. "Latinos are attracted by financial aid packages, but some of these choices may not be as close to home, where costs can be lower. The question is how Latino students from different income groups make these decisions. It is an area we want to study further."

Latinos' choice of intended major and career objectives has remained steady over the years, with biology, psychology, political science, business, nursing and elementary education among the top 10 intended majors at college entry.

Historically, Latinos have tended to characterize themselves as more liberal and less conservative politically than white students, and this is still true today: 43.2 percent of Latinos characterized their political

views as "middle of the road," 34.8 percent as liberal, 17.4 percent as conservative and 1.4 percent as far right. In contrast, 26.2 percent of white students characterized their political views as liberal, and 26.5 percent reported that they were conservative.

Latinos also expressed strong support, but showed gender differences, for several possible election issues: Latino women were more likely than men to agree that same-sex couples have the right to legal marital status (71.3 percent and 57.8 percent, respectively) and that the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns (83.3 percent and 72 percent, respectively). Latino women and men both strongly support the statements that a national health care plan is needed to cover everybody's medical costs (79.6 percent and 74.2 percent, respectively) and that the federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (83.7 percent and 78.6 percent, respectively). Latino men were more likely than women to support the statement that federal military spending should be increased (29 percent and 24.1 percent, respectively), but both were less likely to do so than white students (34.3 percent).

Findings from the report will be released at the Association of American Colleges and Universities' "Diversity, Learning, and Inclusive Excellence" conference in Long Beach, Calif., on Oct. 16.

The report also features data tables on many other CIRP survey items that are part of national norms reports on students' high school experiences, expectations for college, academic experiences and psychosocial behavior.

Authors of the report include Sylvia Hurtado, Victor B. Sáenz, José Luis Santos and Nolan L. Cabrera.

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