

**ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF
FIRST-GENERATION MEXICAN
AMERICAN MALES IN A
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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Carlos C. Peña

DISSERTATION.COM



Boca Raton

*Academic Achievement of First-Generation Mexican American Males
in a Community College*

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*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
-Robert Frost

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DEDICATION

Every artist was first an amateur.
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

This dissertation is dedicated to my high school band director at Asherton High School. An educator that impacted my life, he was my band director for at least a decade, during his tenure at Asherton. He revolutionized the world of academia in me at a young age. This person inspired and taught me to be competitive, and that with hard work, perseverance, and determination much is possible to accomplish your dreams. Forever I am indebted to his commitment and continuous support he contributed to me, throughout his early teachings, that were much evident and with tremendous results at Asherton High School, where I was his band student. The Mighty Trojan Marching/Concert Band, under his direction, received many UIL Sweepstakes and as well as many First Division awards including State Marching Contest appearances of which two were State Marching Championships, 1984 and 1985. To an individual that motivated and inculcated in me to be a winner! This dissertation is dedicated to Mr. Carlos Martinez Jr., Director of Bands at C.C. Winn High School, Eagle Pass ISD. Mil Gracias! Mr. Martínez, se lo agradezco te todo corazón.

Con todo respeto,

Carlos

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the complexities of successful attainment and achievement of 10 Mexican American males in a rural Southwest community college. This study strives to offer insights concerning the questions: (a) what behavioral patterns of current family, peers, and conditions in school have influenced the educational decisions of these Mexican American males? (b) what social conditions motivate these Mexican American males to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity?

This qualitative research was also aimed at establishing and understanding how a selected number of Mexican American males have achieved academic success. The researcher chose 10 men with either an associate of arts or an associate of science degrees for an in-depth interview and used a semi-structured interview guide in an effort to prompt oral discourse. The interviewer posed questions concerning academic conditions, family impact, college environment, and financial issues. The responses to the questions led to similar themes involved in these students' course completion and graduation. The researcher used a theoretical framework using Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (1977) in which he suggests that not only environmental factors, but motivational factors along with self-regulatory mechanisms affect an individual's behavior.

This research illustrated the conditions that facilitated reaching the participant's educational goal and mission, which was to complete a two-year degree at the community college. The inquiry examined the behavioral patterns that have been an influence on the educational decisions of these Mexican American males, and what social conditions have motivated them to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The achievement of Mexican Americans in higher education continues to be a major concern. The success and failure of these students are of national interest. This is especially relevant because of the high non-completion rates in higher education among these groups of students. Burns (2010) focused on the academic achievement of students in community colleges, indicating that at that time special programs are needed to address the attrition problems of Mexican American students. The plans and remedies are based on important studies that have contributed to the achievement of Mexican American students to make significant steps to address their attrition rate.

This research focused primarily on factors that contribute to the success of first-generation Mexican American males at a community college in South Texas. The project explored the completion of a two-year degree of male students by interviewing these men from a local community college that serves an area of 11 counties in South Texas.

Context of the Study

The community college is a two-year institution (which will be referred to South College) of higher learning that grants certificates and degree programs in a total of 24 fields. This institution had a total student enrollment of 6,235, with 4,318 being classified and selected as full-time in Fall 2010. Fifty-eight percent of the students are female and 42% are male. In addition, the ethnic makeup is as follows: 82% Mexican American, 14% White (non-Hispanic), 2% Black, and 2% being classified as “other.” There are 174 faculty members, 112 of whom are employed full-time, and 62 part-time. The staff is made up of 229 full-time and 193 part-time, totaling 422. The total faculty and staff of 596 serve the main campus, and four satellite campuses. The college has served an 11-county area of Southwest Texas since the institution was established in 1946 (South College, 2010).

Even though large numbers of Mexican Americans continue their education at community colleges, there are still many students that dropout after the first semester (Saenz, 2002). Because of their open door policy, community colleges boast of high enrollment, but

graduation rates are actually poor. The Mexican American completion rate is significantly low at 18% (Burns, 2010). Indeed research by Valencia (1994) and Burns (2010), indicates that Mexican Americans historically have had the lowest college graduation of all subgroups in the United States. While college dropout rates are not exclusively a Mexican American problem, the extremely low rate for this group may reflect a negative college experience for Mexican American students which impedes developing a sense of achievement. Indeed, completing college and getting a degree has become a difficult goal for many Mexican American students. In this particular setting, Mexican American male students will undoubtedly benefit from understanding the conditions that foster their academic achievement. This study intended to explore those achievement factors in a community college.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, Mexican Americans have been portrayed as low achievers who lack basic skills, have poor motivation, and who are over-represented in special education classes (Blai, 1972). There is abundant literature that attests their failure to integrate into the American higher education system. While states and the federal government have tried to close the educational gap with different programs, it remains to be seen if these efforts will be successful. The educational problems are compounded by the fact that the Mexican Americans population growth rate is increasing, while their attrition rate at higher learning institutions remains disproportionately low. What must be explored are the conditions influencing first time Mexican Americans who enter college and are able to overcome significant hardships and graduate (Burns, 2010).

One theorist who has made significant contributions to the development and understanding of social learning behaviors in individuals is Albert Bandura. Perceptively, he looked at factors beyond the environment that contributed to personal growth and determination. The researcher used his learning theories, complemented with those of other researchers to demonstrate what differences in the education of Mexican American males in a community college.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the complexities of successful attainment and achievement of 10 Mexican American males in a rural Southwest community college. This research included

males who have pursued different areas of study and who come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The study focused on first-generation college students over a two-to-three year period. It investigated some of the challenges that Mexican Americans faced during their years at a community college and how these and other challenges were resolved as they continued their studies. The study identified, described, and analyzed the silent conditions that promoted or discouraged these college students. The exploration of first semester, first-generation Mexican American males is important because the attrition rates for these students are particularly high between the first and second semester. Students continue their studies, the attrition rates drop, although students face other academic and personal problems in the ensuing years. Community colleges need strategies to retain students, and there are few programs that have successfully addressed retention. These programs all include a blue print of in-depth orientations to college, proactive advising, early warning systems, and well-organized academic support services (McGlynn, 2007).

According to McGlynn, (2007) these institutions' programs: (a) have an institutional focus on student retention and outcomes, not just on enrollment; (b) offer targeted support for underperforming students; (c) have well-designed, well-aligned, and proactive student-support services; (d) provide support for faculty development focused on improving teaching; (e) experiment with ways to improve the effectiveness of instruction and support services; (f) use institutional research to track student outcomes and improve program impact and; (g) manage the institution in ways that promote systemic improvement in student success.

It was important to focus the plight of first semester students and understand their problems in the following semester in order to develop programs that are relevant to their needs. This was researched through discussion/interviews and surveys of participants' perspectives.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What behavioral patterns of current family, peers, and conditions in school have influenced the educational decisions of these Mexican American males?

2. What social conditions motivate these Mexican American males to seek and achieve higher education despite adversity?

Theoretical Framework

This research looked closely at the behaviors of successful students. How is it that two students of similar environments succeed in two very different academic trajectories? Can human behavior be acquired and regulated? Bandura, (1977), suggested that not only environmental factors, but motivational factors and self-regulatory mechanisms, affect an individual's behavior.

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (Bandura, 1977, p. 23)

Each person has, within his environment, experiences that shape and form future behaviors and attitudes that will ultimately lead to academic success or failure. In addition, it has been widely acknowledged that experiential and physiological influences interact in subtle ways to determine behavior (Bandura, 1977).

Social learning theory, later renamed social cognitive theory to more accurately reflect its emphasis on both learning and cognition, has been predominantly in adult learning, ..., Bandura's theory provides a robust set of propositions that are definitely useful. (Gibson, 2004, p. 193)

Bandura contended that many of our actions are learned through observations and modeling of others. Bandura (1977) and Crain (2011) that not all behaviors observed are learned. Conditions involving both the learner and the model can play a vital role in the process of social learning and its success. Bandura (1977) described certain requirements and steps that must be followed. These are the steps according to Bandura that are involved in the observational learning and modeling process:

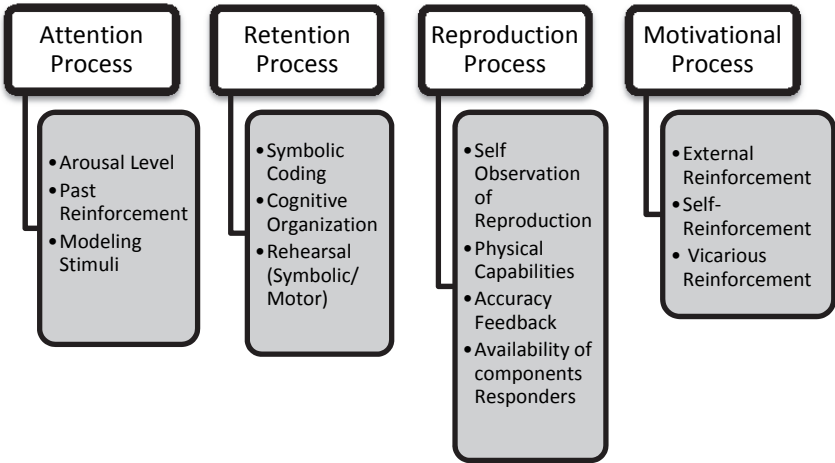


Figure 1. Social Learning Theory Process. Text from Social Learning Theory, Bandura 1977, p. 23.

Bandura (1977), stated that the process of social learning theory consists of four main components: Attention Process, Retention Process, Reproduction Process, and Motivational Process. The attention process is the need to pay attention, and distractions do hinder and have a negative effect on observational learning. These include the arousal level, past reinforcements, and modeling which occur and affect the Mexican American male participants. The retention process is the ability to retain information which is vital to the learning process. Symbolic coding, cognitive organization, and repeated rehearsal are vital in the process of retention and its impact on the observational learning of the participants study. The reproduction process is being able to perform the behavior observed. It is imperative to acquire the physical capabilities to use feedback, and to have self-observation, to be able to reproduce and duplicate what has been learned. Finally, the motivational process, which is based on reinforcement and punishment, involves elements important for observational learning to take place. Also examining the role of external reinforcement, self-reinforcement and vicarious reinforcements (empathy or *consejos*) plays into the motivational process of Mexican American males. These elements that are part of the observational learning theory certainly have an impact on the culture, customs, and traditions of the Mexican American males.

These steps are important in the modeling process of Banduras' Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977).

The functional value of the behaviors displayed by different models is therefore highly influential in determining which models people will observe and which they will disregard. Attention to models is also channeled by their interpersonal attraction. Models that possess engaging qualities are sought out, while those lacking pleasing characteristics are generally ignored or rejected. (Bandura, p. 24)

Learners will extract from repeated observations and modeling what they perceive as "appropriate" and bring them into their own repertoire of behaviors. Modeled behavior is most likely to be adopted if the behavior results in outcomes that are valued by the individual more than the behavior's negative effects.

"Another influential source of social learning is the abundant and varied symbolic modeling provided by television, films, and other visual media" (Bandura, 1977, p. 39). It is through these varied media that different behaviors are shaped and new social attitudes adopted. As this type of symbolic modeling increases, the influence of traditional role models plays a less important role in social learning.

Bandura contended that motivational conditions affect behavior and can encourage new behaviors. Newly modeled behavior can have an impact on previously learned behavior positively or negatively, depending upon the frequency in which the new behavior is modeled (Bandura, 1977; Crain, 2011).

Cultural patterns of behavior are regulated and transmitted through social systems at various steps of development. A family can only provide some modeling for conduct; other influences and sources will provide skills and behaviors that are required at varied stages of social development. While parents usually initiate their child's educational aspirations, the child can also be encouraged further by teachers and peers. Parents contribute in the gradual development of behaviors, belief systems, and attitudes necessary for achieving academic success.

Self-regulation is considered one of the components in social learning theory. "Self-regulation is when the individual has his own ideas about what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior and chooses actions accordingly" (Ormond, 1999, p. 5). An individual

will eventually respond to his own behavior in either an approving or disapproving way, depending on how it compares to standards that have been set forth by others. The second step in the self-regulation process is judgment. In this step an individual will compare observed behaviors with standards and rules set forth by himself or by society and his environment. The final step in this process is self-response. During this step an individual will look at the behavior or action and judge whether or not he has attained a particular standard. If the standard has been achieved he will reward himself accordingly. If however, the individual does poorly, he will administer a punishing self-response (Bandura, 1977).

Significance of the Study

The college enrollment of Mexican Americans has increased over the last few years, but the graduation rates have not increased for this research population. The issues related to attrition must be further investigated. The research approach must deal with interpreting the data from a student's perspective to understand the problems and ascertain what factors contributed to first-generation college student achievement.

Large numbers of Mexican Americans are attending community colleges because of the increasing population of that group. But there are also a large number of Mexican American students who do not advance beyond their first semester (Aguirre & Martinez, 1994; Burns, 2010).

While acknowledging that mixing personal experience with research has its problems, sometimes a researcher's biases cannot be dismissed. Noting the researcher's personal experience, and the fact that previous literature does not deal with such specific subject matter, this research is relevant in addressing student success. This researcher, an adjunct psychology instructor at the selected college, has noticed that every spring semester there is a noticeable absence of students--those who do not return for their second semester. A review of the literature did help clarify a number of pertinent aspects of this study, the literature may be lacking in answers to the specific research problem dealing with academic success (Whitman, 1998), and this study hopes to remedy that. The literature is generally deficient in addressing specific conditions that may contribute to the success of Mexican American male students after their first semester in college. The questions as to what specifically contributes to the achievement of Mexican American male students are simply not

adequately addressed in previous research (Aguirre & Martinez, 1994; Burns, 2010).

Definition of Terms

To specify the central phenomena of this investigation the following terms are defined:

Community College: This is a two-year institution of higher learning; in this study, a college in South Texas.

Chicano: In the 1960s, ‘Chicano’ was revived as a political term that implied not just a nationality or ethnicity but a counter-hegemonic worldview. The term, never simple, has undergone re-examination in recent times. Some redefinition has been sparked by the massive increase in Latinos from Central and South America, as well as México, which has spurred re-examining nationalism and its relationship to internationalism, and other questions (Martínez, E. & Elbaum M. (2005).

Hispanic: Referring to peoples of Spanish, Latin American, and South American heritage (Martínez, E. & Elbaum M. (2005).

Familism: A model of social organization, based on the importance of the family group and its well-being placed against the interests and necessities of each one of its members (Vega, 1990).

Mexican American: A term used to describe group designation of all the participants. Persons of Mexican descent of either one or both parents or grandparents living in the United States, to include individuals who identify themselves as Mexican Americans. This is the term that the researcher will use to identify the

- Success:* population in this research. In the study, this term will be used to describe the successful completion of a two-year academic degree (e.g. Associate of Arts or Associate of Science).
- Unit of analysis:* Individualized narrative.

Methodology Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate, examine, and determine the circumstances in which 10 Mexican American male students persisted in their studies and succeeded in obtaining an Associate of Arts or an Associate of Science degree. Chapter 2 presents a synthesized review of the relevant literature. Chapter 3 discusses the results in narrative form: that is, this research studied several individual cases as suggested by Stake (1994). According to Yin (1989) “how and why” questions are answered well when conducting qualitative research. Yin further states that “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). This methodology allowed the interviewer an up-close and personal view and understanding of the participant’s sense of drive and determination that led to the completion of a two-year degree. Thus, this procedure allowed the researcher to determine how the interviewees’ personal lives were formed.