

# Navigating the Pandemic: Enrollment Decisions and Educational Experiences of Latino/x College Men Attending Hispanic Serving Institutions in the South Texas Region<sup>12</sup>

Journal of College Student Retention:  
Research, Theory & Practice  
1–20

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/15210251231153874

journals.sagepub.com/home/csr



Luis Ponjuán<sup>1</sup> , Emmet Campos<sup>2</sup>,  
Jase Kugiya<sup>2</sup>, Armando Lizarraga<sup>2</sup>,  
and Julio Jesus Mena Bernal<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic was a primary cause for the decline in college enrollment rates for Latino/x college men over the last two years. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore how these students discussed their decisions to attend and enroll college since the onset of the pandemic. Using the Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we tried to understand how Latino/x college men, who were first time in enrolled in college, navigated their educational experiences in South Texas Hispanic Serving Institutions. The findings revealed sobering realities that these students faced uncertainty, isolation, mental health concerns, but they also relied on faculty members, staff, and student peer groups to survive the pandemic. We conclude with

<sup>1</sup>Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Luis Ponjuán, School of Education and Human Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 77843, USA.

Email: [luis.ponjuan@tamu.edu](mailto:luis.ponjuan@tamu.edu)

recommendations that educational leaders, faculty members, and professional staff should consider to develop a college climate and classroom environment which values Latino/x college men and improves their educational outcomes.

**Keywords**

Latino/x college men, access and retention, hispanic serving institutions

The Covid-19 pandemic has created unprecedented and unexpected challenges to our postsecondary educational systems and our marginalized minoritized student groups, especially men of color attending colleges. Recent national educational reports highlight the disparate impact on enrollment (Huie et al., 2021; Sutton, 2021), persistence, and graduation rates for racial/ethnic subgroups of college men (Martinez et al., 2021) and these sobering enrollment patterns have also occurred at postsecondary institutions in the South Texas region. In this research paper, we examined the ongoing and persisting challenges faced by Latino/x college men<sup>3</sup> in the South Texas region, with a particular focus on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected how they navigated their collegiate experiences.

The research literature highlights the importance of understanding how the ongoing pandemic challenges have negatively affected enrollment patterns in K-12 (Dee & Murphy, 2021), and at two- and four-year institutions (Huie et al., 2021). In the state of Texas, the enrollment trends mirror the national trends which suggests that Latino/x college men, which is the largest marginalized racial ethnic male student group in the state, had significant declines in enrollment rates in higher education institutions. We seek to understand the potential known and unknown factors that determine how Latino/x college men decide to enroll and persist in South Texas region higher education institutions. The purpose of this research paper is to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the postsecondary participation patterns of Latino/x men enrolled as college students in the South Texas regional institutions.

The research question guiding our research paper is, how do Latino/x college men who enrolled for the first time in college during the Covid-19 pandemic era (Fall 2020 to present) described their educational experiences to enroll and persist in South Texas two- and four-year public Hispanic Serving Institutions? For this study, we specifically wanted to understand the potential emotional and psychological toll these students endured when enrolling in their institutions during a turbulent and uncertain time in higher education history.

**Review of the Literature**

It is important to explore how the pandemic shapes enrollment decisions for Latino/x college men because Texas represents the second largest enrollment percentages in the country (17 percent), second only to California (28 percent) (Excelencia in Education, 2022). There is a robust literature base on Latino/x male students that have examined

their decisions to pursue higher education (Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2019), their educational experiences at community colleges (Peña & Rhoads, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Sáenz et al., 2018), and coping with their psychological challenges (Badiee & Andrade, 2019). The recent pandemic has also created unprecedented challenges to the educational experiences of college students (D'Amico et al., 2022). However, less is known about how college men of color, particularly Latino/x college men, have endured and navigated these challenges during the pandemic. In order to contextualize our study, this section will detail the extant literature on Latino/x college men's decision to pursue higher education and provide an overview of their experiences balancing their academic and personal responsibilities.

### *Latino/x College Men's Decisions to Enroll in College*

Although Latino/x student enrollment in higher education has steadily grown over the past decades, the enrollment of Latino/x college men is an ongoing concern, especially in response to socioeconomic factors and workforce demands that may lead them to pursue work rather than continuing their education (Hatch et al., 2016; Ponjuán et al., 2021). In a society with an ever-growing pressure to financially survive the inflationary costs of basic food and home needs, Latino/x males often must choose between continuing their education, which could mean taking out loans and accruing debt, or pursuing a job to immediately provide for themselves and their family. In these instances, extant literature reflects how the cultural significance of gender roles and familial expectations (i.e., *machismo* and *caballerismo*) for Latino/x men can further complicate their enrollment decisions; in some instances, this meant pursuing employment instead of pursuing a college education. For example, Sáenz et al. (2013) found that employment, and not education, helped Latino/x men feel masculine. Similarly, Martinez and Huerta (2020) found that Latino males viewed joining the military as an option "worthy for a man to achieve" (p. 132). Conversely, Patrón (2020) and Huerta and Fishman (2014) identified how family, specifically positive role modeling for siblings, motivated Latino males to pursue their education. Especially for the first-generation participants, their pursuit of a higher education built their "family's educational aspirations" (Patrón, 2020, p. 454). Furthermore, as it relates to providing for their family, Carey (2021) found that some Latino men are motivated to pursue their education because they understand the long-term implications that having a degree can have in regard to providing for their family.

While there are a number of factors that go into Latino/x college men's decisions to enroll in higher education or join the workforce, the extant literature reflects the complex decisions they have to weigh in relation to their pride, gender roles, and familial expectations.

### *Balancing Personal and Academic Demands*

Existing literature on Latino/x college men's persistence related to balancing personal and academic demands relates closely with their gender roles, familial expectations,

and socioeconomic status. Scholars described how Latino/x male students face pressure from their parents to assist with their family's finances, even if their parents are supportive of going to college (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). The added pressure to financially contribute to their family in addition to supporting themselves can put further pressure on Latino/x college men, which can negatively affect their educational experiences. Cerezo et al. (2013) shared that Latino/x male students who receive little to no financial support from their family respond by working more hours. Corroborating the findings of Cerezo et al. (2013), Abrica and Martinez (2016) provided insights into this phenomenon by describing how one student, in effort to support their immediate and extended family, decided to create his own business which adversely affected his academic performance and resulted with him stopping out and pursue full-time employment. Given the existing financial hardships experienced by Latino/x college men prior to the pandemic, in this study we want to understand how Latino/x college men are balancing their academic and financial needs during the pandemic.

The extant research literature has limited discussions about how Latino/x college men, particularly in Texas, navigated their enrollment decisions during the ongoing pandemic. Given the racial composition of Texas relative to the other states, there is a critical need to increase and improve the educational pathways of Latino/x college men. In this study, we advance the research diaspora on Latino/x college men in this critical time in higher education. Towards that end, this study explores the voices of Latino/x college men who enrolled in South Texas higher education institutions (e.g., community colleges and four-year institutions) during the pandemic era.

The extant research literature has limited discussions about how Latino/x college men in South Texas navigated their enrollment decisions during the ongoing pandemic. Given the critical need to increase and improve the educational outcomes of Latino/x college men, this study attempts to advance the research diaspora on Latino/x college men in this critical time in higher education. Toward that end, this study explores the voices of Latino/x college men who enrolled in South Texas higher education institutions (e.g., community colleges and four-year institutions).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In order to understand how Latino/x college men decided to enroll in college during the pandemic, we utilize a social psychology theoretical lens, the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen, 1991), to guide our research inquiry. Ajzen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior suggests that behavioral intentions are shaped by three forces: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms in relation to the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior. Therefore, understanding Latino/x college men's decision to enroll in the midst of the pandemic can assist in understanding these students' experiences behind their decision-making process in enrollment and forms of coping to balance their academic and family demands. Ajzen (2005) suggests that previous behavior is a precursor to an individual's intention of future behavior unless faced with extenuating circumstances. Further, the theory of planned behavior

considers the multitude of background factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, nationality, religion, past experiences, social support, coping skills, geographic-specific information, and so forth. As such, the framework considers how all these factors influence individuals' behavioral, normative, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 2005). Additionally, intentions are the first form of motivating an intended behavior and influencing: attitudes, subjective norms, and behaviors (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). For example, Caska (1998) examined graduating seniors' intentions to apply for a job and their job-seeking behavior and found that prior intentions predicted behavior and these intentions were predicated by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Other research studies have utilized this theoretical framework to understand first-year students' intentions regarding degree aspirations and attainment (Ingram et al., 2000) and college students' intention to participate in civic engagement activities (Bowman, 2011). Ingram et al. (2000), utilized the theory of planned behavior to predict college students' intentions and behaviors related to graduate school admissions from their attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived control over their behaviors. The findings supported Ajzen's theory and scholars found that these students' attitudes about graduate school and their understanding of how graduate school would benefit their future careers was the most influential predictor (Ingram et al., 2000). Bowman's (2011) usage of Ajzen's theory informed how diversity experiences and interpersonal interactions with racial diversity were associated with an increase in civic attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behaviors. However, there is a lack of scholarship that has applied Ajzen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior to examine students of color's attitudes, behaviors, and intentions in pursuing a postsecondary education, specifically Latino/x men. In the current study, the theoretical model provides us the flexibility to explore how attitudes, subjective norms, and control of their behaviors informed Latino/x college men's decision to enroll in the Fall 2020 academic term and beyond. Given that there was an absence of educational resources during the pandemic, to further understand students' enrollment experiences and coping mechanisms to address their academic and familial needs. Therefore, our study expands the higher education literature with our application of Ajzen's theory to understand how Latino/x college men made decisions about attending postsecondary institutions in the South Texas region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Methodology**

This initial study is part of a larger multi-year and multi-institutional research project that explored the academic experiences of Latino/x college men from the South Texas region during the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically from 2020 to present. Furthermore, we used a case study design (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2014), in which we used each focus group of Latino/x college men from each institution as one institutional case to

explore patterns and better understand how they described their decisions to enroll in their respective institutions.

### *Latino/x College men Sample*

We relied on our campus liaison to use a convenient sampling strategy to recruit eligible Latino/x college men. Furthermore, our campus liaison specifically recruited participants from various academic majors and who were initially enrolled full-time at their respective institution in the Fall 2020 academic year. For example, these student participants were enrolled in a variety of academic programs ranging from business, humanities, fine arts, social sciences, and technical trades. They also ranged from 18 years of age and older than 24 years of age.

We notified all focus group participants via email and prior to our campus visit, about the purpose of the study, their eligibility, their responsibilities, and compensation for participating in this study. In addition, we informed them that their participation was voluntary and that they can pause and/or withdraw from the study at any time. Once participants agreed to the study, we gave each student a consent and participant demographic intake form. Finally, we averaged at least three students per focus group with a total of 16 Latino/x college men from three public four-year institutions and one community college in South Texas. Finally, all of these institutions have a Hispanic Serving Institution designation.

### *Interview Focus Group Questions Protocol*

We used a semi-structured interview protocol that emerged from one primary construct that asked students to describe their pathways to apply and enroll in their respective community college or four-year institution. We grounded this construct in the research literature focused on Latino/x college men's decisions to attend higher education and the related factors that may influence how they navigate their academic and personal lives during the pandemic.

For this initial study, we asked these students the following questions: 1) As a first time in college students, please describe why you decided to apply and enroll into your college during the last two years of the Covid pandemic? Next, 2) What do you wish that your institution would do or say to help you as a First time in college student to succeed in your first academic year?

The composition of our interview protocol questions provided a complex and nuanced discussion about how these students provide a unique and timely understanding of how they decided to enroll and how they managed multiple demands on their time. Due to the dearth of research on minoritized Latino/x college men during the Covid pandemic, we wanted to explore how this nascent pandemic social phenomenon influenced their decision making to attend college.

## *Focus Group Interview Data Collection Process*

We conducted four 90-min focus group interviews with Latino/x college men who were enrolled for the first time in college (since fall 2020 or later). This data collection method was the most efficient and valuable qualitative data collection method to explore their educational experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). We conducted and digitally recorded the focus group interview sessions in person in 2022.

## *Interview Data Analysis*

We transcribed the interviews using a transcription service. We conducted several meetings with the members of the research team to read and review an interview transcript to understand the flow of the interview and create a shared meaning. We then divided transcripts between each team member to begin the coding process. We met to discuss potential themes that emerged from the initial codes. From this iterative process, we were able to better understand how Latino/x college men in the South Texas region decided to attend college. Furthermore, it allowed us to understand the ways they described the ways their institutions responded to their needs during the pandemic.

## *Positionality of Researchers*

As members of a statewide network for over a decade, we had developed a working relationship with Texas postsecondary institutions to collaboratively engage in conducting research and advocacy work to help improve how leaders, faculty members, and professional staff meet the needs of college enrolled Latino/x college men. We developed longstanding trust and rapport as Latino/x men scholars (the primary investigator also identified as a former undocumented student and later naturalized US citizen) and with doctoral students who were racial and ethnically diverse men.

## **Qualitative Findings**

The narratives of students who enrolled during the pandemic provided compelling and challenging perspectives from these Latino/x college men. We discovered four key themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group interviews: 1) Importance of proximity and financial costs to attend college, 2) Concerns about access to college information and instruction quality, 3) Difficulties with managing their mental well-being during the pandemic, and 4) Value of faculty, staff, and near peer support groups.

### *Importance of Proximity and Financial Costs to Attend College*

Across all of the campus site visits, these students discussed why they chose to attend their respective institutions during the pandemic. Regardless of the institutional types

(e.g., community college or four-year institution), the geographic location of these institutions was a primary driving force for these students. For example, student attending a four-year institution stated,

I decided to attend [this institution] because it was not so far from home but close enough. [It] did offer me the greatest amount of financial aid through scholarships and some grants—some even COVID-related. It was mostly because of that. Mostly the financial aid.

A Latinx/o man who attended another four-year institution stated a similar sentiment,

The location of [this institution] is, um, very close to where I grew up and it's, um, it's some I'm like more familiar with, like, versus me going to, um, University of North Texas or something somewhere, I, I feel foreign in a way. Um, yeah...As of location, I would say, um, number one because of cost.

In addition, coupled with the proximity factor, the importance of financial decisions to attend an institution closer home as a compelling narrative that emerged from the students. For instance, one student mentioned the combination of location and financial reasons for attending a local institution. Another Latinx/o man attending a four-year institution poignantly stated,

And I thought, why should I have to move so far away from home to get that same level of, of education like this campus is, is just as good as, as any other campus. I don't see why I shouldn't come here. Um, this option was a lot cheaper, which was also very, uh, a very big factor on my family. Um, a lot of the other schools offered a lot of, um, tuition for, um, for first, uh, for first in family college students as well as, um, as well as people who were coming in as like freshmen.

Across these narratives, the Latinx/o men stated the primary drivers for attending college during the pandemic were location and the associated lower financial costs. This may suggest that the geographic location and insular aspect of these institutions and the potential to maximize their financial aid created compelling reasons to stay near family and to affordably fund their college education.

### *Concerns About Access to College Information and Instruction Quality*

Even though these students made a conscious effort to attend locally, their journey to understand how to navigate the policies and cope with the shift to online instruction, proved to be a daunting and uncertain process. For example, a Latinx/o man who attends a four-year institution shared his concerns and frustrations with navigating college during the pandemic. He stated,



yeah, you were left in the dark. Basically, you have to do everything on your own, and there was little to no communication with counselors or your high school. Getting familiar with the college and how everything was going to work, it was really troublesome.

Another student at the same institution mentioned similar concerns about the impact of the pandemic and normal campus activities. He stated,

It was so little information about COVID. Vaccines weren't out yet. People didn't know how fast it could spread. People were dying left and right. People were just leery about going in-person, face-to-face. There was really not much different that they coulda done, especially because COVID was a new thing. It had never happened before. I mean, there was a plague that happened back in the early 1900s, but it wasn't anything like this where it spread to.

In conjunction with the challenges of navigating their first years of college during the pandemic, another recurring issue was their frustrations and concerns about their classroom experiences. A community college student stated some of the fears of his classroom experiences during the pandemic by stating,

When I got to college, it was very different 'cause everything was through Zoom, and I still didn't know what I wanted to major in. Once I got over the intro classes I started getting into engineering, and from there I just liked it. I did college because I wanted to get my career over with.

Another Latinx/o student who attended a four-year institution mentioned about his transition to the online classroom experience,

So, when the pandemic first hit, um, it was like, uh, something new to adjust to. None of us were really used to, um, online courses. I've never taken previous online courses, so it was something that I would have to learn automatically, like, um, and to learn very fast too because um, like we need these classes done and stuff. But I would say, um, it wasn't too difficult since they did kind of show us how to navigate everything.

The coupling of lack of information to successfully navigate college and the concerns about their online classroom experiences highlight the levels of frustration many of these students faced during the pandemic. These narratives were profoundly challenging moments that may suggest these students made valiant efforts enroll in college and take online courses during a turbulent and sudden transition to different learning platforms. Unfortunately, there was a cost that emerged when we asked students about their emotional and psychological well-being.

### *Difficulties with Managing Their Mental Well-Being During the Pandemic*

The primary and most prevalent theme that emerged from the four site visits was the emotional and psychological toll these Latino/x college men endured throughout the last two years. Their narratives were raw, poignant, and courageous. A compelling commentary from a student who attended a four-year institution stated,

Well, since the time when COVID hit, I was outgoing, stuff like that and a lotta stuff. This new environment of going into college without knowing anyone, all alone, stuff like that, it took a toll on my confidence and kinda made me shy. I didn't really wanna talk to anybody. I was in my room, taking classes virtually and stuff. I felt like I was in my own bubble. It was hard to reach out and ask for help. I feel like a lot of guys can relate to that, that it's hard reaching out for help. You wanna do everything on your own. Yeah.

A student attending another four-year institution stated how his mental health suffered and how it affected his relationship with his family. He courageously stated,

And then during Covid, I spent an entire year like basically just locked up in my room, just doing Zoom classes. My parents still don't know how me, and my brother managed it. Cause it was brutal. What was so brutal about it? Well, just, you didn't get to have that classroom opportunity. I was just in my room. Um, and I think being stuck in the house whole time had effects on my mental health and my, like everyone else in my family's mental health. Because I feel like my relationship with my parents, who I was obviously living with at the time, it got a lot more strained during that time.

Another student attending a four-year institution stated how his mental state pushed him into social isolation, he stated,

I just wanna stay home 'cause you know how, like he said, a lotta people were getting sick, and they're passing away. A lot of my friends at work, they were coming out positive. I got in my mindset where I just wanted to be left alone with whoever I live. I don't wanna know about anyone. At that time, I stopped trying to come back to school. I was just waiting for it to go back to normal.

Finally, another student mentioned how he noticed the gender differences and help-seeking behaviors, he stated,

I feel like women are just better at expressing feelings naturally. I feel like men tend to hold it in and dissimulate, pretend it's not there, whatever. If you add COVID on top of that, that lack of that social interaction, you lose the practice. Like with most things, you have to keep practicing at it. The fact that, sometimes, you're isolated, don't have contact with much people hinders your ability to communicate. It's hard for men to communicate as it is sometimes, so I'd say that.

These sobering narratives created a complex and understated portrait of the mental health issues faced by some of these Latino/x college men attending both community and four-year institutions. Suffice to say, these comments offer a window into the unspoken challenges many of these students faced during the pandemic. This may simply suggest that these challenges have far-reaching effects for Latino/x men who want to attend college in the South Texas region.

### *Value of Faculty, Staff, and Near Peer Support Groups*

The focus group discussions also provided these students to share how they coped during the pandemic. That is, several students across the institutions discussed how the faculty and student services professional staff were instrumental in their ability to cope with the pandemic and enroll into college. For instance, one community college student mentioned how faculty members helped during the pandemic. He stated,

I could say if I got a low grade on an assignment or on a test, they would reach out to me via email and they would tell me, “Hey. We could set up a Zoom meeting.”—this was like during 2020. “We could set up a Zoom meeting, and I could help you understand why you got this wrong and everything...”

Another student attending a four-year institution also stated the value of meeting with his professors,

...really starting to meet one on one with your professors cuz they’re always available and they have their office hours and stuff like that. Uh, it, it took a lot of work on my part to recover from the scourge put on my life by Covid.

Concomitantly with the academic/faculty support they received; the students also mentioned the significant role of professional staff members to help them through the pandemic. One community college stated his gratitude,

I thought that my advisers were very helpful in the sense that she would always check up on—well, we always do monthly meetings. From there they’d say like, “Oh. How are you doing?” “How is class going?” She was especially helpful because at random times she would just send scholarships that would apply to my major, and internships that we can apply to. With the advisers at [institution] during the Covid-19, I felt they were very helpful with that.

While those interpersonal factors were essential to their success, these students also mentioned their reliance on near-peer student groups to help them cope with the pandemic. One community college student stated,

The eSports was helpful. It was usually a connect between most of us. There is a group of students that we still play with. As well as playing, we also have to have the responsibility of focusing on our classes. Our coach would inform us like, “Oh. How’s everybody’s classes?” and he would check up on that. If he did inform us that if he notices that our grades are dropping dramatically, he would pull us away from the group of the eSports for a moment to increase our grade using the things that we have in campus such as tutoring.

Another student attending a four-year institution also shared a similar comment about the value of first-year experience courses. He also stated,

Definitely the first-year seminar was definitely a really big step of getting to know people on campus and getting to make those connections. Um, especially when it came to learning about resources on campus and all of those, uh, they showed, they introduced me to a lot of the people in leadership positions.

This final theme provides some solace and hope that faculty members, professional staff, selected student groups, and academic support courses may have assuaged the challenges associated with the pandemic. These narratives create an important focus on understanding how these students navigated the pandemic in South Texas institutions.

## **Discussion of Findings**

These selected findings provide some critical insights about the educational experiences of Latino/x college men who attended community colleges and four-year institutions in the South Texas region since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned earlier, the research question guiding this research study was, how do Latino/x college men who enrolled for the first time in college during the Covid-19 pandemic era (Fall 2020 to present) described their educational experiences to enroll and persist in South Texas two- and four-year public Hispanic Serving Institutions? This timely question reflected the responses based on the most recent academic terms. Additionally, we will discuss these findings using Azjen’s theoretical framework which provides us the flexibility to explore how Latino/x college men’s attitudes, subjective norms, and control of their behaviors informed their decision to enroll and persist in the Fall 2020 academic term and beyond.

The research is replete with evidence that Hispanic/Latino/a/x students who attend community colleges are more likely to cite that close institutional proximity was a driving factor in their decision to attend college (Vasquez et al., 2020). Our study supported this earlier research, but also that Latino/x college men attending four-year institutions also made similar decisions to attend locally. We surmise that the decision to attend a local four-year institution was partly attributable to the pandemic and the uncertainty of attending an institution farther away from home. More importantly

many of the students also mentioned how financial factors contributed to their decision to stay closer to home. Researchers have found that these financial decisions are prevalent in the enrollment patterns for many Latino/x students (Cuellar, 2019).

Upon closer review, these findings also support the notion that Azjen's theory that an individual's attitude about attending college may be predicated on the value that earning a degree may benefit them. In particular, we speculate that attending an institution that is closer and more affordable had a positive influence for their future behavior. We also surmise that many of our participants decided to attend college in the local South Texas region, because they recognized the importance of being the first in their family to attend college was worth the effort, even during the pandemic. That is, the courage that these students demonstrated during the pandemic to attend college illustrates the importance of earning a degree as a strong factor to their perseverance and tenacity during the uncertain times of the pandemic.

Next, the findings also highlighted how these students had to navigate college participation amidst the pandemic despite the lack of information available and the concerns about their online instruction experiences. Similar to other recent studies have found that many Hispanic students faced challenges with the onset of online instruction during the pandemic (Clobes & Alonge, 2021), and the lack of private spaces to engage in learning (Mshigeni et al., 2022). Our findings support these earlier studies and highlights the ambiguity and frustration many Latino/x college men faced in the initial months of the pandemic. Suffice to say, these findings also highlighted the emotional toll these students faced in attempts to enroll with limited access to information and the social isolation from participation in online classes.

Importantly enough, these findings support Azjen's notion of an individual's intention were shaped by subjective norms. In our study, we found that these Latino/x college men were motivated to pursue a college education during a national pandemic. Like many other students, the pandemic forced these students to enroll in online courses in order to achieve their intention to graduate from college. However, unlike many other students, our students shared different stories that highlighted the isolation and uncertainty of taking online courses. Perhaps these narratives present a distinct perspective that subjective norms (e.g., taking online courses during the pandemic) may have shaped their intentions, but they also experienced some unintended consequences related to living in South Texas and being a Latino/x man.

We placed Latino/x men's mental health at the core of this study to help advance the discussion on this critical topic in higher education research. Recent scholars found that Hispanic Latinx youth faced overwhelming challenges related to the pandemic (Penner et al., 2021) and limited access to mental health services (Coley & Baum, 2021). Our conversations with Latino/x men at these institutions in the South Texas region demonstrated the complexities of mental health issues faced by these men. More importantly, many of these students clearly demonstrated that they were aware of their declining mental health during the pandemic.

Similar to the previous factors that may influence behavioral intentions, Azjen's discussion of perceived control over the behavior suggests that these students' perception of the lack of control they had with the effects of the pandemic was daunting and detrimental to their overall mental health. That is, we speculate that the lack of control created by the uncertainty of the pandemic has disparate effects on these students, due to their acknowledgment that they lacked help-seeking behaviors. This suggests that many of these students recognized that they were struggling with the online learning process and their intentions to pursue were compromised by the debilitating effects of doubts, loneliness, and isolation.

Finally, we found a sense of hope with our focus group interviews when these students discussed the faculty and staff support and student and academic support groups during the pandemic. We recognized that many of these students were resourceful to find the people and groups to help them manage college during the pandemic. Scholars have noted that many faculty members, during the pandemic, made efforts to improve the online experiences of marginalized student groups (Wiseman, 2022). Additionally, the research supports the importance of faculty interactions with Latino/x college men (Salinas & Rodríguez, 2020) and near-peer groups and Latino/x men mentoring (Peña & Rhoads, 2019) to improve their sense of belonging (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020), and the need for more holistic teaching methods (Rendón, 2012).

This final theme from our findings provides an additional context on how individual's intentions shape their behavior. We suspect that the modest yet tangible support of key individuals and experiences in student clubs and first-year experiences provided some positive affirmations and sense of belonging to fortify their decisions to stay committed to remaining in college. In addition, we believe that these students demonstrated their willingness to accept help and support from these various sources.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

There have been a number of empirical studies that have explored the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic for college students (Lee et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020), and especially for students of color (Molock & Parchem, 2020). As mentioned earlier, a clear byproduct of the pandemic were the declines of enrollment rates for men of color in higher education, and especially for Latino/x college men. We extended the research literature conversation to include how Latino/x college men in the South Texas region navigated these uncertain times. Our research study provided some insights about the complexities associated uniquely to Latino/x college men, and especially, in a geographic region of the country that has limited opportunities to access higher education. The findings created an important and complicated picture of this region.

We recognize that the findings from this study do not provide a universal truth for Latino/x men who live in the in South Texas because there were many students who have left that we did not interview. Nonetheless, there is compelling need for institutions to rethink how they can better serve a population of students with so much

untapped potential. We provide some critical implications and recommendations for higher education leaders, faculty members, and student affairs practitioners.

First, we need to continue to create a narrative that includes Latino/x college men in higher education, especially at institutions that have endured significant declines in Latino/x men enrollment. The national reports indicated that men of color have left higher education since the onset of the pandemic. We hope that our study makes a clear focus that any discussions about improving the educational outcomes (e.g., access and persistence), must include Latino/x college men across the nation and communities like South Texas.

Next, we need to develop a greater sense of urgency through institutional policies, programs, and practices that inform how we meet the needs of diverse groups of Latino/x men in community and four-year institutions. We found that there was a diversity of voices for the first time in college Latino/x men from South Texas. We argue that institutions must become proactive and assertive to develop initiatives that make Latino/x college men feel seen and valued by the institution (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). Scholars have found that focusing on the values of diverse funds of knowledge improves these students' educational experiences (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018).

We must also recognize that Latino/x men in the South Texas region provide a compelling and sobering view about their unspoken challenges that negatively influence their psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. The effects of the pandemic only exacerbated these emotions and institutions need to respond in equal and more purposeful intention to address how to empower these students to seek help. The findings were compelling and clear, higher education leaders must address the multifaceted mental health needs of Latino/x college enrolled men.

Finally, we also recognize that institutions need to create more professional development training to guide faculty members and professional staff to recognize and address how to effectively engage with and listen to Latino/x college men. In addition, these students expressed a greater desire to create formal groups via student affairs/services and academic support services to help them find support and encouragement. We contend that there is more to address with how we prepare college administrators, faculty members, and professional student services staff to meet the needs of Latino/x college men in Hispanic Serving Institutions and other higher education institutions.


### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Trellis Foundation (Grant number: 15162).

## ORCID iDs

Luis Ponjuán  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6200-2154>

## Notes

1. The author(s) disclose that the Trellis Foundation funded this research project to develop this research publication. There are no additional conflicts of interests related to this research publication.
2. We presented this research paper at the 2022 ASHE National Conference in Las Vegas, NV.
3. In this paper we used the term Latino/x college men instead of Latino/x male students to describe the broad and diverse heterogeneous identities based on racial, ethnic, national origins, undocumented status, and other-gendered masculine voices (Jourian, 2018).

## References

- Abrica, E. J., & Martinez, E. Jr (2016). Strategies for navigating financial challenges among Latino male community college students: Centralizing race, gender, and immigrant generation. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 23(2), 59–72.
- Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. In J. Kuhl, & J. Beckman (Eds.), *Action-control: From cognition to behavior* (pp. 11–39). Springer.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Management and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Ajzen, I. (2005). *Attitudes, personality and behavior*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Badiee, M., & Andrade, E. (2019). Microsystem and macrosystem predictors of Latino/x college students' depression and anxiety. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 18(4), 422–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192718765077>
- Bowman, N. A. (2011). Promoting participation in a diverse democracy: A meta-analysis of college diversity experiences and civic engagement. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(1), 29–68. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654310383047>
- Carey, R. L. (2021). Foregrounding family: How Salvadoran American boys formulate college-going mindsets at the nexus of family, school, and the self. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 52(3), 294–314. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.1111/aeq.12372>
- Caska, B. A. (1998). The search for employment: motivation to engage in a coping behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 28(3), 206–224.
- Cerezo, A., Lyda, J., Beristianos, M., Enriquez, A., & Connor, M. (2013). Latino men in college: Giving voice to their struggles and triumphs. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 14(4), 352–362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029646>
- Clobes, T. A., & Alonge, H. C. (2021). Instructional support for first-generation hispanic students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Hispanic Educational Technology Services Online Journal*, 12(1), 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.55420/2693.9193.v12.n1.42>
- Coley, R. L., & Baum, C. F. (2021). Trends in mental health symptoms, service use, and unmet need for services among US adults through the first 9 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 12(7), 782. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibac010>
- Cuellar, M. G. (2019). Creating hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) and emerging HSIs: Latina/o college choice at 4-year institutions. *American Journal of Education*, 125(2), 231–258. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701250>



- D'Amico, M. M., Atwell, A. K., Spriggs, J. N., & Cox, J. A. (2022). Are we doing enough? COVID responses from urban and rural community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 46(1-2), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1961925>
- Dee, T. S., & Murphy, M. (2021). Patterns in the pandemic decline of public-school enrollment. *Educational Researcher*, 50(8), 566–569. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X2111034481>
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2011). *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.).
- Dueñas, M., & Gloria, A. M. (2020). ¡ Perteneceemos y tenemos importancia aquí! exploring sense of belonging and mattering for first-generation and continuing-generation Latinx undergraduates. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 42(1), 95–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986319899734>
- Excelencia in Education (2022). Latino College Enrollment: Past, Current, and Projections. Retrieved from website: <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/fact-sheets/latino-college-enrollment-past-current-and-projections>.
- Hatch, D. K., Garcia, C. E., & Sáenz, V. B. (2016). Latino men in two-year public colleges: State-level enrollment changes and equity trends over the last decade. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 23(2), 73–92.
- Huerta, A. H., & Fishman, S. M. (2014). Marginality and mattering: Urban Latino male undergraduates in higher education. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 26(1), 85–100.
- Huie, F., Lang, R., Liu, Q., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (2021). *COVID-19 transfer, mobility, and progress: final look spring 2021*. Report. Fourth in the Series. National Student Clearinghouse.
- Ingram, K. L., Cope, J. G., Harju, B. L., & Wuensch, K. L. (2000). Applying to graduate school: A test of the theory of planned behavior. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 15(2), 215–226.
- Jourian, T. J. (2018). Trans\*forming higher education men and masculinity studies: A critical review. *International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 13(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2016.1260313>
- Kiyama, J. M., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2018). *Funds of knowledge in higher education*. Routledge.
- Lederer, A. M., Hoban, M. T., Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., & Eisenberg, D. (2021). More than inconvenienced: The unique needs of US college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Education & Behavior*, 48(1), 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120969372>
- Lee, J., Jeong, H. J., & Kim, S. (2021). Stress, anxiety, and depression among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and their use of mental health services. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46(5), 519–538. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09552-y>
- Liu, C. H., Pinder-Amaker, S., Hahm, H. C., & Chen, J. A. (2020). Priorities for addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(5), 1356–1358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1803882>
- Manzano-Sanchez, H., Matarrita-Cascante, D., & Outley, C. (2019). Barriers and supports to college aspiration among Latino/x high school students. *Journal of Youth Development*, 14(2), 25–45. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2019.685>
- Martinez, E.Jr, Brooms, D. R., Franklin, W., Smith, M., Bailey, A., & Quarles, M. (2021). Systemic response: Developing a strategic response to support young men of color during COVID-19 pandemic. *Education Sciences*, 11(12), 800. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120800>
- Martinez, E., & Huerta, A. H. (2020). Deferred enrollment: Chicano/Latino males, social mobility and military enlistment. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(1), 117–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124518785021>
- Molock, S. D., & Parchem, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on college students from communities of color. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(8), 2399–2405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1865380>

- Mshigeni, S., Arroyo-Romano, J., & Becerra, M. (2022). "We don't all have the privilege of having our own quiet place": College students in a hispanic serving institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 21(3), 251–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2056463>
- Patrón, O. (2020). "The revolution begins at home:" exploring educational aspirations between Latino male collegians and their families through a reciprocity of relationships. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(4), 446–464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1681545>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Peña, M. I., & Rhoads, R. A. (2019). The role of community college first-year experience programs in promoting transfer among Latino male students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 43(3), 186–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1453393>
- Penner, F., Ortiz, J. H., & Sharp, C. (2021). Change in youth mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in a majority Hispanic/Latinx US sample. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 60(4), 513–523.
- Ponjuán, L., Lester, M. A., & Hernández, S. H. (2021). *A decade of disparities examining national educational outcomes for male racial subgroups*. Project MALES Research Digest Series.
- Rendón, L. I. (2012). *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy: Educating for wholeness, social justice and liberation*. Stylus Publishing.
- Rodriguez, S. L., Blaney, J. M., Vasquez, M. C., & Salinas, C.Jr (2021). Latino men and masculinities: A multi-institution study of community college transfer experiences. *Community College Review*, 49(3), 262–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211002898>
- Sáenz, V. B., Bukoski, B. E., Lu, C., & Rodriguez, S. L. (2013). Latino males in Texas community colleges: A phenomenological study of masculinity constructs and their effect on college experiences. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 4(2), 82–102.
- Sáenz, V. B., García-Louis, C., Drake, A. P., & Guida, T. (2018). Leveraging their family capital: How Latino males successfully navigate the community college. *Community College Review*, 46(1), 40–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552117743567>
- Sáenz, V. B., & Ponjuán, L. (2009). The vanishing Latino male in higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(1), 54–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192708326995>
- Salinas, C.Jr, & Rodríguez, C. (2020). Tocayo epistemology for Latino males in education. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 22(1), 130–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1714626>
- Stake, R. E. (2000). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 134–164). Sage Publications.
- Sutton, H. (2021). Recent research shows dismal outcome for community college enrollment after COVID-19. *Recruiting & Retaining Adult Learners*, 23(7), 8–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nsr.30717>
- Vasquez, M. C., Salinas, C.Jr, Rodriguez, S. L., & Gonzalez, A. (2020). Landing spaces and capital: Transfer resiliency and knowledge building among Latino men. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2020(190), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20389>
- Wiseman, M. A. M. (2022). They deserve to engage and see: promising practices for faculty providing online courses at a Hispanic serving institution (29165940) [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University].
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (5thed.). Sage Publications.

## Author Biographies

**Luis Ponjuán** is an associate professor of Higher Education Administration in the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development in the School of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University. His research agenda focuses on Latina/o/x students, college men, community college access, persistence, and degree completion, marginalized students in STEM programs, and faculty members of color. He has presented at the White House, State higher education boards, and community college Board of Trustee meetings. He earned his PhD from the University of Michigan and is a Cuban immigrant, naturalized U.S. citizen, and first-generation college graduate.

**Emmet Campos** directs UT Austin's Project MALES/Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color & serves as its chief operations officer. He also teaches in the College of Liberal Arts & College of Education. He earned his PhD in Cultural Studies in Education/C&I at UT and has published articles in the *Harvard Educational Review* and *Voices in Urban Education*. Previously, he directed initiatives focused on men of color and Latinx student college transfer and completion at the Center for Community College Student Engagement and served as Director for the Institute for Community, University, and School Partnerships (UT Austin).

**Jase Kugiya** is a doctoral candidate studying higher education leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at The University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on addressing educational inequities for racially minoritized students with a particular focus on Asian and Native Hawaiian students as well as men of color. By centering student voices in his work, he hopes to challenge institutions, particularly minority-serving institutions, to reassess their student support initiatives and redistribute resources to their minoritized students. He received his B.S.W. from Saint Martin's University and his M.S.W. from The University of Michigan.

**Armando Lizarraga** is a current doctoral student in the program of higher education leadership at The University of Texas at Austin. Currently, he is a graduate research assistant for Project MALES and is also a co-instructor for the Texas Prison Education Initiative at a women's correctional facility. Drawing on his lived experiences, he continues to promote consciousness and an understanding of the social, academic, political, and cultural issues that concern how underrepresented students access postsecondary education, specifically incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students. His research is centered on the intersections of prison education programs, higher education access, and financial aid.

**Julio Jesus Mena Bernal** is a Master's student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Program at The University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include the usage of critical frameworks and methodologies, race and ethnic relations, and

critical education policy to examine the social, cultural, and economic conditions that affect the educational opportunity and attainment of historically underserved populations. His passion and commitment towards enacting systemic change through education policy are grounded in experiential knowledge from being excluded from the educational process, opportunity, and lack thereof representation of people of color in higher education.