



# **THE SOUTHERN IMMIGRANT ACADEMIC ADAPTATION STUDY**

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**ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE: LATINO STUDENTS  
GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL IN NORTH  
CAROLINA**

**Final Report**

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Most importantly, we want to acknowledge and deeply thank the youth and parents who told us about their lives and experiences.

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# CONTENTS

SUMMARY .....	1
PROJECT DESCRIPTION.....	3
METHODS .....	4
OVERVIEW OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS.....	7
SCHOOL ASPIRATIONS and FUTURE PLANS .....	9
SCHOOL MOTIVATION .....	11
CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL SUCCESS.....	12
School Belonging.....	12
Family Economic Hardship .....	13
Family Obligations.....	15
Perceived Discrimination.....	17
FACTORS PROMOTING SCHOOL SUCCESS .....	20
Personal Health .....	20
Ethnic Identity.....	21
Family Identification.....	23
Teacher Support .....	25
CONCLUSIONS.....	28
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	29
LIMITATIONS.....	31
REFERENCES .....	32

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## SUMMARY

This report focuses on the academic experiences and aspirations of Latino high school students in North Carolina who were enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade during the 2009-10 academic year. Because the participants in this study include primarily students enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, these students represent some of the most successful Latino students in the state. They are students who have beaten the odds, stayed in school, and are expected to graduate. In North Carolina, only an estimated 50% of Hispanic students versus 70% of White students graduate from high school in four years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Drop out rates are highest in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when students turn 16 and are no longer required to attend school.

In this report, we provide an overview of the individual and family characteristics of Latino youth enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and expected to complete high school. We then describe the academic aspirations and motivations of Latino students. Finally, we discuss key factors affecting Latino youths' academic aspirations and, ultimately, their high school completion.

- About half of the Latino students in our study are foreign-born (51%), with 24% born in Mexico. Of the U.S.-born, 46% are the children of immigrants and have knowledge of migration through the experiences of their parents. About 41% of the U.S.-born students identify themselves as ethnically Mexican.
- Both foreign- and U.S.-born students are highly motivated to achieve and consequently, have high academic aspirations. Over 70% of both foreign- and U.S.-born students hope to graduate from a 4-year college or more. Compared to foreign-born students, U.S.-born students feel less motivated to achieve and only weakly connect their current educational experience to both their present and future well-being.
- Several factors limit students' educational advancement. These include:
  - **School Belonging:** While most (82%) Latino students felt a moderate to high sense of belonging to their school by the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, a small but still substantial percent of students (18%) felt estranged. These students tended to exhibit lower academic aspirations.
  - **Family Economic Hardship:** Forty-percent of Latino 12<sup>th</sup> graders have experienced one or more economic hardships. Due to the economic recession of 2008-2010, the percentage of Latino students experiencing hardships increased significantly between their freshman and senior years. These economic hardships were associated with financial pressures and increased the likelihood that students would *not* aspire to a 4-year college degree or more. Instead students who experienced economic hardships during their senior year were more likely to aspire to graduate from high school and move directly into work or attend a 2-year college, perhaps while working.

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- Family Obligations: Many (50%) Latino students take on adult responsibilities early in life to help their parents run their households. Although some (17%) students reported that these obligations distracted them from their school work, those with more obligations had higher academic aspirations than those with fewer family obligations. Thus, family obligations may reflect a student's maturity and be a source of pride for students rather than a potential burden.
  - Perceived Discrimination: Both foreign- and U.S.-born Latino 12<sup>th</sup> graders perceived widespread discrimination in their schools and communities. Nevertheless, they perceived lower levels of discrimination in 12<sup>th</sup> grade than they had experienced in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (29% vs. 16%). These moderate to high levels of perceived discrimination were associated with reduced academic aspirations of Latino students. Those who reported moderate to high levels of perceived discrimination were less likely to aspire to a 4-year college degree or more.
  - While Latino students encounter significant challenges to their academic success, other factors hinder these obstacles. These include:
    - Personal Health: A large majority of foreign-born and US-born students reported having good physical health (87% and 68%, respectively) and their physical health support their academic aspirations. While the majority of students also reported good mental health, over a third of students exhibited symptoms of depression which could threaten their academic achievement.
    - Ethnic Identity: Most (58%) of foreign-born students ethnically identified with their countries of origin. At the same time, most (58%) of U.S.-born students chose a hyphenated-American identity that reflected both their attachment to America and their pride in their ethnic background. Strong ethnic identities can be a valuable resource for students, especially when facing social-marginalization and discrimination. However, in our study, we found a slight negative relationship between ethnic affirmation and belonging and academic aspirations. This may be partly due to foreign-born students' limited financial access to 4-year college.
    - Family Support: The majority of Latino students (60% of US-born and 68% of foreign-born) reported strong familial bonds. Family support motivated Latino youth to achieve. Moreover, those students with strong sense of family belonging and support had higher academic aspirations than those with a weaker sense of family belonging and support.
    - Teacher Support: Over two-thirds of students reported excellent relationships with adults at school. Moreover, Latino students who had better relationships with adults at school typically had higher academic aspirations. These positive relationships help Latino students cope with and overcome obstacles to their educational success.

To improve the academic achievement of Latino youth in North Carolina, factors preventing students' success need to be reduced and factors that promote students' success should be encouraged. The recommendations at the end of this report provide ways that schools can work with Latino students, their families, and their communities to facilitate the educational advancement of Latino students and help them achieve their academic goals.

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The 1990s were marked by a dispersal of immigrants, especially Latino immigrants, to new areas in the United States. Among these, North Carolina ranked first in the growth of new immigrant and Latino families. The influx of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> children to North Carolina and other new receiving communities has had a profound impact on states' educational systems and is of enormous public policy significance. This study is the first longitudinal and population-based study of the daily acculturation and academic experiences of Latino youth in North Carolina.

Latin American and Caribbean immigrants (58% of the 618,878 foreign-born residents of NC) have dominated the new migration stream to North Carolina. As Latinos, many speak little to no English (35%) and live below the federal poverty level (30%) (American Community Survey 2009). Lacking an established infrastructure for serving multilingual and multicultural populations, North Carolina and other states with emerging immigrant communities face many challenges in incorporating immigrants.

The *Southern Immigrant Academic Adaptation Study* (SIAA) builds on the work of an earlier study, the *Los Angeles Social Identification and Academic Adaptation* and utilizes comparable and well-tested data collection techniques. The study began in 2006-07 when the participating youth were enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In this third and final wave of data collection, youth were enrolled in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade or had dropped out of school. The main objectives of the third wave of data collection were to:

- (1) Identify the extent to which the *daily acculturation experiences* of Latino immigrant youth changed between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (i.e. age 14 and age 18) and understand how *psychosocial factors* (e.g., gender, immigrant generation, ethnic identification, family values, school orientation, and work orientation) shaped these changes.
- (2) Evaluate the association between daily acculturation experiences and the *mental well-being* of immigrant youth as they transition from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades.
- (3) Determine how daily acculturation experiences in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades and psychosocial factors work together to promote high school completion by Latino immigrant youth.
- (4) Examine the *civic engagement* of Latino immigrant youth in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, identify how their civic engagement varies by psychosocial factors (e.g., gender, immigrant generation, family values, school orientation, and work orientation), and how civic engagement is affected by daily acculturation experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, we will use the words "Latino" and "Hispanic" interchangeably to describe the population of interest. We recognize that these terms span a variety of cultural groups with different migration histories, cultural traditions, and needs.

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## METHODS

This report utilizes data from both Waves 1 and 3 of the SIAA study.<sup>2</sup> Wave 1 data were collected from 239 Latino students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade during the 2006-07 academic year. Wave 3 data were collected from 219 Latino students who had enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade or dropped out by the 2009-10 academic year. The sources of data include the students themselves, the parents' of the students, and the students' academic transcripts.

Forty-two percent (N=92) of the students participating in Wave 3 of the study had previously completed interviews during their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year in a participating high school (see Potochnick and Perreira (2007) for findings from 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviews). This group of participants constitutes our longitudinal sample. An additional 127 students who had not participated in 9<sup>th</sup> grade agreed to participate in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade survey.

Students participating in this study attended one of nine high schools in North Carolina.<sup>3</sup> These high schools were selected during Wave 1 of the study to ensure economic variation in the communities in which Latino youth live. High schools with at least 24 Latino students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2000 were stratified into two groups—urban and rural. Urban high schools were defined as high schools serving counties where over 50% of the population lived inside an urbanized area or urban cluster. Rural high schools were defined as serving counties where 50% or less of the population lived in an urbanized area or urban cluster. At Wave 1, four high schools from the urban stratum and five high schools from the rural stratum were selected for participation using a probability proportional to the number of 9<sup>th</sup> grade Latino students in each county.<sup>4</sup> After receiving active consent from parents, all students in the school who self-identified as Hispanic or Latino were recruited. Students who agreed to participate in Wave 1 received a \$15 thank-you gift for their participation.

At Wave 3, interviewers returned to students' schools to conduct interviews with 12<sup>th</sup> graders still enrolled in high school. Additionally, interviewers mailed questionnaires to students who had dropped out of school but had participated in Wave 1 of the study. As in Wave 1, students who agreed to participate in Wave 3 received a \$15 thank-you gift for their participation. All Latino 12<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in participating schools as well as previous participants were eligible to participate at Wave 3. Forty-nine percent of Latino students enrolled at participating high schools agreed to participate and 42% of students who participated at Wave 1 were re-

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<sup>2</sup> All analyses are based on unweighted data. However, statistics were re-evaluated using the weighted data. Though percentages varied slightly (0-4 percentage points) from those reported here in some cases, the interpretation of the results remained the same.

<sup>3</sup> To protect the confidentiality of participating students, the SIAA project does not release the names of participating schools or school districts.

<sup>4</sup> At Wave 3, one urban high school declined to participate. Therefore, only students from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade who had previously participated could be contacted and re-interviewed via phone and mail. Because many Latino students move frequently and have disconnected phone numbers, we were only able to reach 6 of the students in this non-participating school.

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interviewed at Wave 3. The vast majority (87%, N=95) of students who we were unable to re-interview had disconnected phone numbers or had moved within the past two years. Only six students who participated in Wave 1 refused to participate; six were living outside of the U.S.; one was deceased; and one was incarcerated. Among those whom we were unable to locate, we confirmed that 21 had transferred to a different school, nine had dropped out of school; and two had graduated early.

Because the participants in Wave 3 include primarily students enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, these students represent some of the most successful Latino students in the state. They are students who have beaten the odds, stayed in school, and are expected to graduate. In North Carolina, only an estimated 50% of Hispanic students vs. 70% of White students graduate from high school in four years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Drop out rates are highest in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when students turn 16 and are no longer required to attend school.

At both Waves 1 and 3, participating students completed an in-school questionnaire, a take-home questionnaire, and 14 daily-diary checklists. The two questionnaires gathered information regarding the students' immigration histories, socioeconomic backgrounds, language use, family relationships, cultural and ethnic identifications, educational attitudes, and physical and mental health. In Wave 3, questions on civic engagement were added. The daily diary checklists were used to study how students adapt to various challenges and stressors in their everyday lives. Table 1 provides a summary of the content covered by each data source at both Wave 1 and Wave 3.

In addition to completing questionnaires and daily diaries, 24 students and their mothers completed separate, in-depth personal interviews at both Waves 1 and 3. At Wave 3, in-depth personal interviews were conducted with six students who had dropped out of school, eight students who were close to completing high school, and ten students who intended to attend college. These interviews helped provide in-depth information on the work and family lives of students, their civic engagement, and the strategies youth and their parents use to complete high school and/or transition into the workforce in North Carolina. All participants in these interviews received an additional \$15 thank-you gift.

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**Table 1. Content of Student Questionnaires and Daily Diary**

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<b>In-School and Take Home Questionnaires</b>	<b>2006-07</b>	<b>2009-10</b>
(1) Immigrant history	X	X
(2) Socioeconomic background	X	X
(3) Language use	X	X
(4) Family identification and obligations	X	X
(5) Cultural and ethnic identification	X	X
(6) Educational attitudes	X	X
(7) Rejection sensitivity	X	X
(8) Perceived discrimination	X	X
(9) Physical Health	X	X
(10) Mental health	X	X
(11) Civic Engagement		X
(12) Future Plans		X
<b>Daily Diary</b>		
(1) Negative events and stressors	X	X
(2) Time spent on school, work, and family activities	X	X
(3) Academic engagement	X	X
(4) Feelings and moods	X	X
(5) Role fulfillment	X	X

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Note: Only self-reported health is included as a physical health measure in 2009-10.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Latino students enrolled as high school seniors were less likely than freshman to be foreign-born. In 2009-10, 51% of the Latino students interviewed were foreign-born; 46% were U.S.-born children with foreign-born parents; and only 4% were U.S-born children with U.S.-born parents. Most of the foreign-born students were of Mexican origin (49%) and had immigrated to the U.S. by age 12 (75%).

**Table 2. Selected Latino Student Participant Characteristics**

	2006-07 Freshmen		2009-10 Seniors		2009-10 Seniors	
	Cross Section		Cross Section		Longitudinal Sample	
	%Mean	N	%Mean	N	%Mean	N
<b>Student Characteristics</b>						
Boys interviewed	46%	239	45%	219	38%	92
Girls interviewed	54%	239	55%	219	62%	92
Average age of youth (mean)	15	237	19	217	19	90
Foreign Born	70%	239	51%	219	54%	92
Mexico	54%	166	49%	108	46%	50
Central America/Carribbean	33%	166	29%	108	36%	50
South America	13%	166	22%	108	18%	50
Age at arrival (foreign born)						
12 years old or younger	64%	167	75%	110	86%	49
13 years old or older	36%	167	25%	110	14%	49
U.S. Born	30%	239	49%	219	46%	92
Second generation	89%	72	90%	105	88%	40
Third+ generation	11%	72	10%	105	13%	40
<b>Family Characteristics</b>						
Youth lived with two biological parents	57%	232	50%	172	49%	76
Student has lived apart from one or both parents	63%	224	68%	166	52%	83
Average household size (mean)	4	232	3	214	3	92
At least one parent graduated high school	48%	223	55%	219	54%	92
Both parents are employed	60%	210	47%	197	52%	83
<b>Language Characteristics</b>						
English spoken in the home	59%	220	75%	162	80%	70
English primary home language	16%	221	26%	160	26%	68
Students speak/understand English very well	42%	224	65%	166	66%	73
Students read/write English very well	37%	224	57%	166	55%	73
Students speak/understand Spanish very well	69%	212	63%	158	66%	70
Students read/write Spanish very well	47%	212	44%	158	40%	70

Note: The 2006-07 cross section includes all Latino freshmen interviewed in the participating high schools. The 2009-10 cross section includes all Latino seniors interviewed in the participating high schools. The longitudinal sample includes Latino students interviewed at both points in time. The sample size is lower on family and language characteristics collected via the take-home rather than in-school survey due to missing (N= 5) take-home surveys.

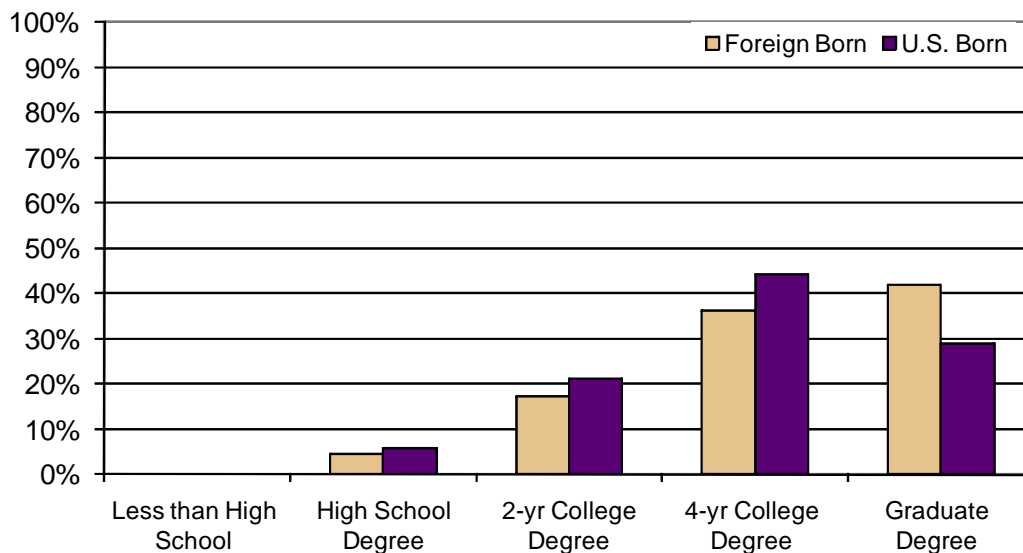
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During both their freshman (2006-07) and senior years (2009-10), the majority (57% and 50%) of youth lived with both biological parents but had lived apart from one or both parents at least once (63% and 68%). In addition, most seniors continued to speak and understand (63%) as well as read and write (44%) Spanish very well. Thus, the majority of Latino high school seniors had maintained their bilingual skills throughout high school. However, students who continued into their senior year in high school were more likely than freshman to be U.S.-born (49% vs. 30%) and came from smaller households (4 vs. 3 persons) where English was the primary language spoken at home (15% vs. 26%). These differences between the freshman and senior samples reflect the higher probability that foreign-born youth move, change schools, or drop out of high school and consequently, were more difficult to locate for follow-up interviews.

## SCHOOL ASPIRATIONS and FUTURE PLANS

By the time Latino students reached their senior year, all of them expected to graduate (Figure 1). However, foreign-born students on the brink of completing high school were more likely to aspire to continue their education past a 4-year college degree and obtain graduate or professional degrees than their U.S.-born peers (42% vs. 29%). This is consistent with research showing that foreign-born students who complete high school are more likely than U.S.-born students to continue on to post-secondary education (White and Kaufman, 1997).

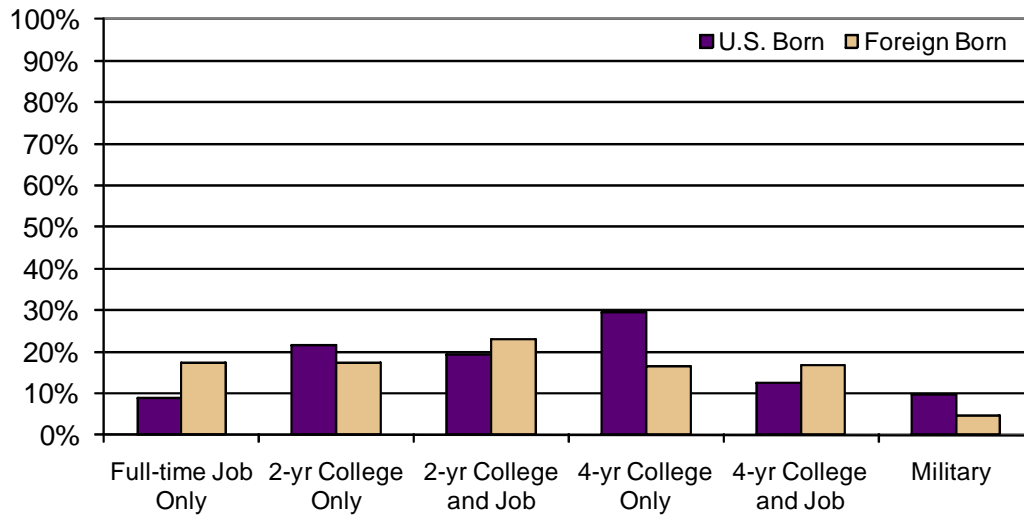
**Figure 1. Seniors' Academic Aspirations by Nativity (n=214)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

Despite their high college aspirations, 43% of all Latino students planned to get a full-time job after graduation. While the majority of students (59%) had taken either the ACT or SAT, tests required for entry into most 4-year colleges, only 41% of students had plans to immediately enroll in a 4-year college the year after graduating. In particular, the foreign-born had a higher likelihood of obtaining a full-time job and forgoing any college education or combining college attendance with a part-time job (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Students' Future Plans by Nativity, 2009-10 Seniors (n=211)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

## SCHOOL MOTIVATION

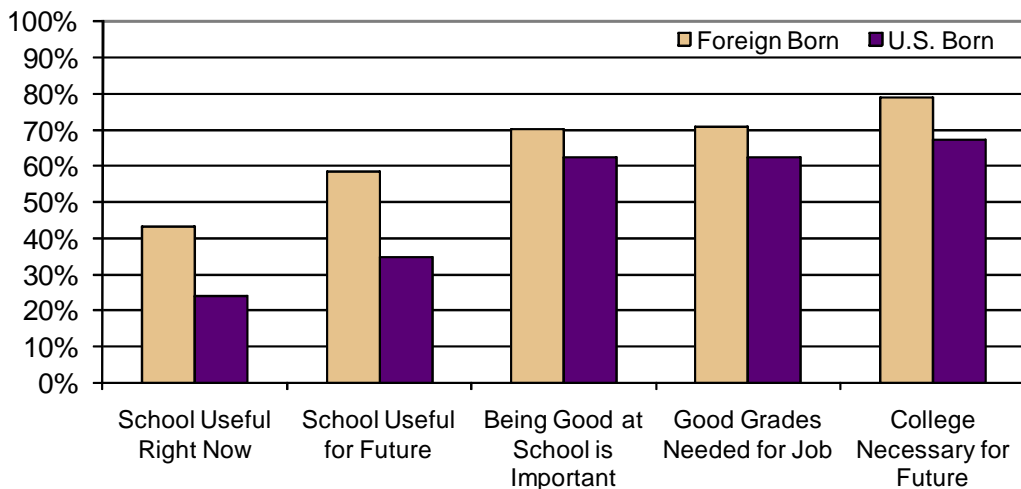
Though both foreign-born and U.S.-born seniors aspired to additional schooling beyond high school, different factors motivated their achievement (Figure 3). In comparison to U.S.-born students, more foreign-born students believed that school was useful both now (59% vs. 35%) and in the future (43% vs. 24%). This recognition of the current and future value of school was also reflected in our qualitative interviews. As José commented,

R: [...] You have to get a good education to get a good job in life [and] to succeed in life. My parents have always told me, “You have to get a good education to get somewhere in life. Because without a good education, you’ll be like me working in the hogs all day with aching everywhere and stuff. And I don’t want that for you. So, I want you to go get your education and get a better job.” So, that’s why [education] is so important to me.

[José, U.S.-born, ID 23009a]

U.S.-born students were more disenchanted by high school but, as with their foreign-born peers, they considered success in high school to be important for obtaining jobs (60-70%) and a college education to be necessary for what they wanted to do in the future (70-80%).

**Figure 3. Students' School Motivations by Nativity, 2009-10 Seniors (n=215)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

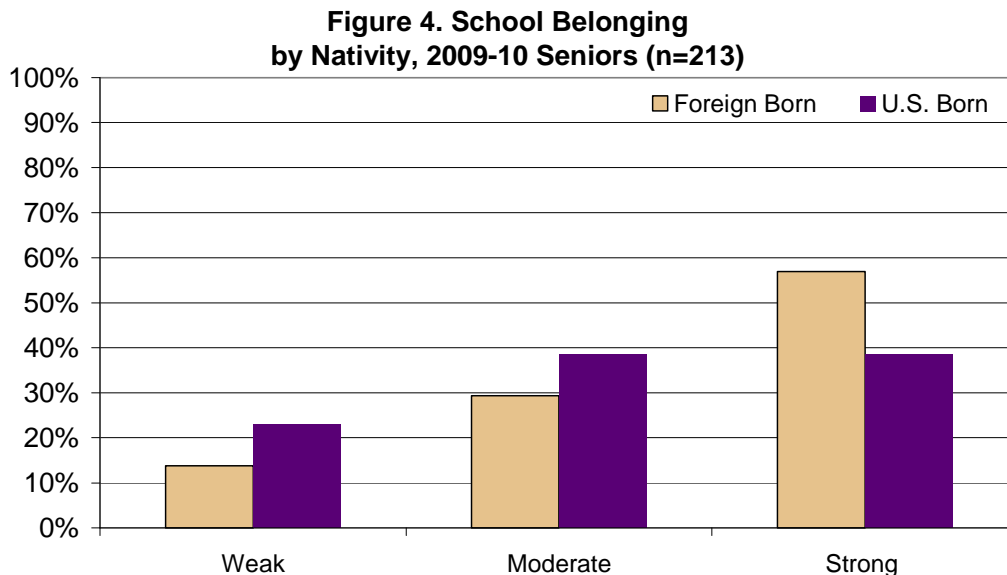
## CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL SUCCESS

Although Latino students have high academic aspirations and are motivated to finish high school, a lack of school belonging (Stone & Han, 2005), perceptions of discrimination (Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2008), family financial stressors, and family obligations can potentially reduce students' aspirations and ultimately, their likelihood of completing high school. We examine these factors below.

### School Belonging

Based on six questions pertaining to students' feelings about their schools (i.e. I feel a part of my school, I am happy at school, and I belong at my school), we created an ordinal scale to indicate students' sense of belonging to their schools (Fuligni, 1997).

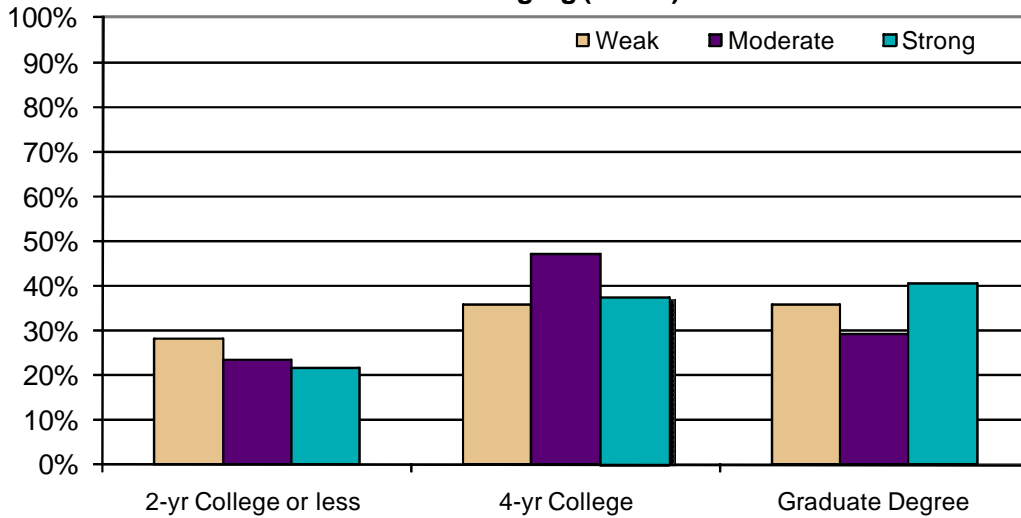
The majority (82%) of Latino students had a moderate to strong sense of school belonging during their senior year in high school. However, this sense of school belonging varied by nativity. More foreign-born students had a strong sense of belonging than U.S.-born students (Figure 4: 57% vs. 38%). In addition, their sense of belonging increased slightly between their freshman and senior years. Seventy-nine percent of foreign-born students who stayed in high school until their senior year had a moderate to strong sense of school belonging compared to 74% in their freshman year.



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

These variations in school belonging by nativity and over time have consequences for students' academic attainment and achievement (Figure 5). Those students with a moderate to strong sense of belonging are more likely to aspire to complete a 4-year college degree or more; whereas students with a weak sense of belonging tended to aspire only to completing a 2-year college degree or less.

**Figure 5. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Sense of School Belonging (n=212)**

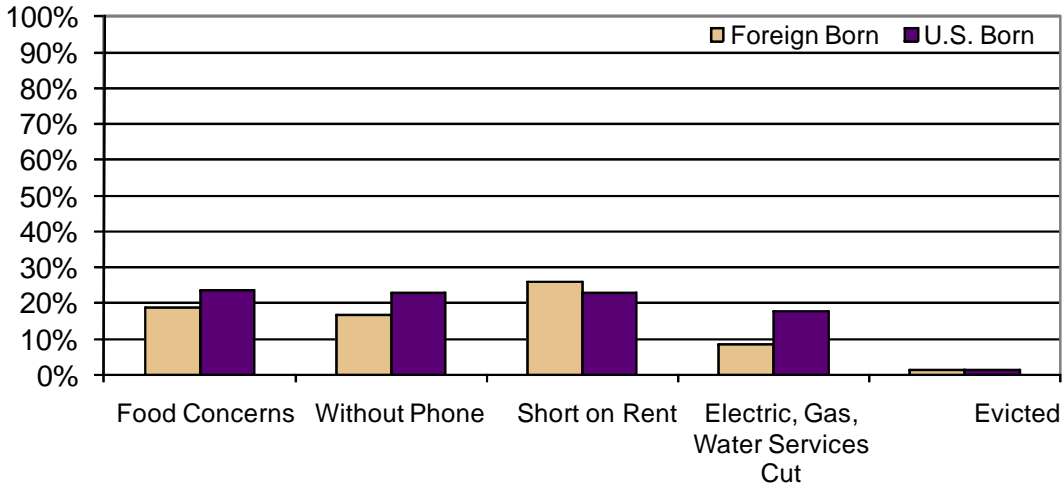


Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

### Family Economic Hardship

Like a low sense of school belonging, economic hardships can reduce students' focus on their school work and lower their academic aspirations. Hardships include losing telephone (20%), gas, electric, or water services (13%); not being able to pay the rent or mortgage (24%); facing eviction (1%); and food insecurity (21%). Overall, 40% of all Latino students experienced one or more economic hardships and these experiences differed little by nativity (Figure 6).

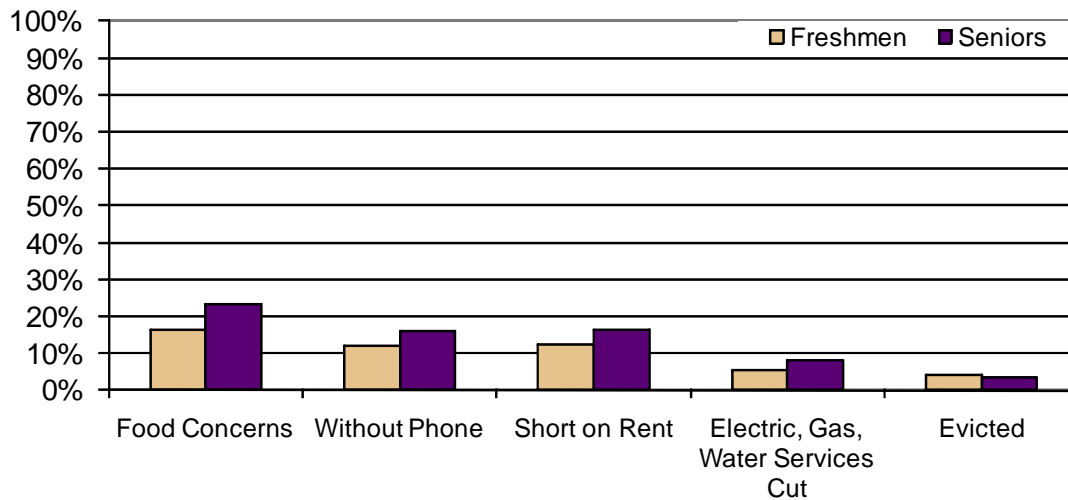
**Figure 6. Family Economic Hardship  
by Nativity Status, 2009-10 Seniors (n=164)**



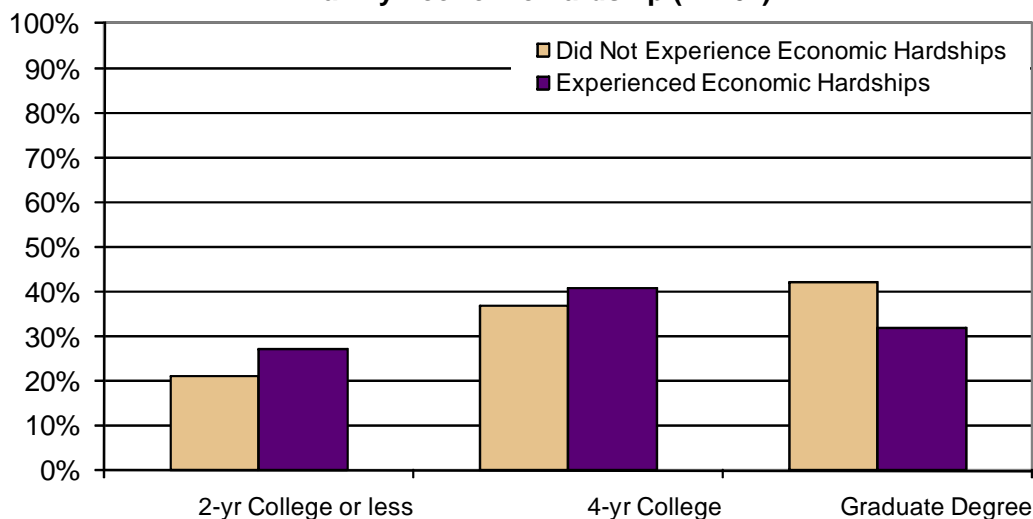
Note: Sample size (n) is less than 219 due to missing values on the take-home survey.

The risk of experiencing an economic hardship increased during the time of our study (Figure 7). In 2006-07, when students were freshman, fewer reported food insecurity, being without a telephone, and being short on rent. The economic downturn starting in 2008 took a toll on many families and increased the rates of economic insecurity reported by seniors in 2009-10.

**Figure 7. Students' Experiences of Family Economic  
Hardship, Longitudinal Sample by Year (n=92)**



**Figure 8. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Experiences of Family Economic Hardship (n=161)**



Note: Sample size (n) is less than 219 due to missing values on the take-home survey.

In comparison to those who did *not* experience economic hardships in their senior year, those who experienced economic hardship were somewhat more likely to aspire to complete only a 2-year college degree or less (Figure 8: 27% vs. 21%). Their lower academic aspirations may partly reflect their immediate need for income. As suggested by Fernando in the quote below, students facing economic hardships often work during high school to help support their families and cannot afford to be out of the labor force while attending a 4-year college. Thus, despite the fact that 76% of seniors aspired to complete a 4-year college degree or more, only 41% reported that they were intending to enroll in a 4-year college degree program the year after graduating high school. Many (43%) were planning on getting a full-time job.

I: What made you decide you wanted to get a job?

R: ... the going got tough for my parents, because they bought this house in 2005 I believe, and they were both working one job each, but it was a full time job, steady. Then work started to slow down, and at that time my dad still had - both my parents still had a full time job - but it was still going - the mortgage payment was still high, it was around 800 dollars just for that, so I wanted to get a job to try to help them out, or if not help them out, at least cover my own expenses so they won't have to worry about that. So that's the main reason I decided to get a job.

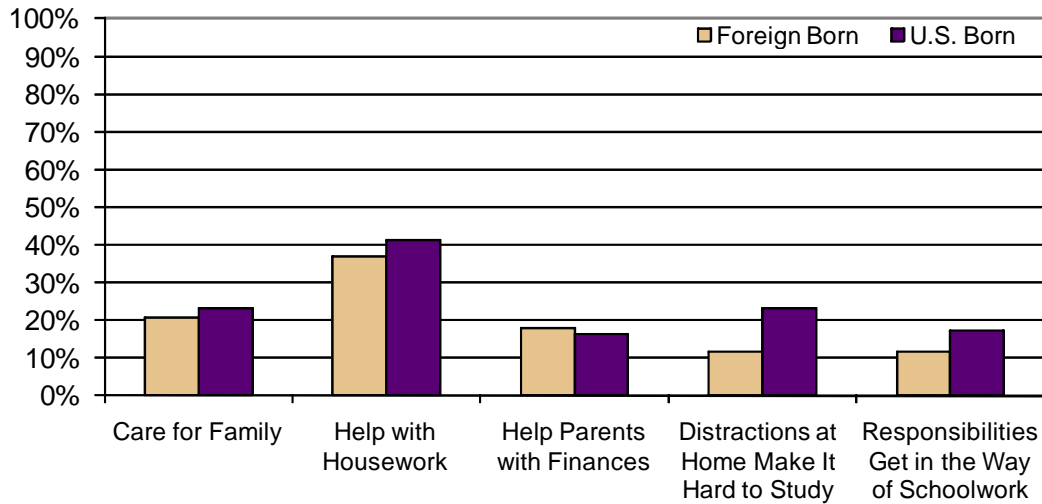
[Fernando, Foreign-born, ID 35035a]

### Family Obligations

Work is only one type of adult role Latino high school seniors take on as they transition out of adolescence (Figure 9). They also engage in taking care of family members (22%), helping with

house work (39%), and helping parents with their finances (17%). For both foreign-born and U.S.-born students, sometimes these responsibilities can get in the way of school work (17%) and make it hard to study (14%).

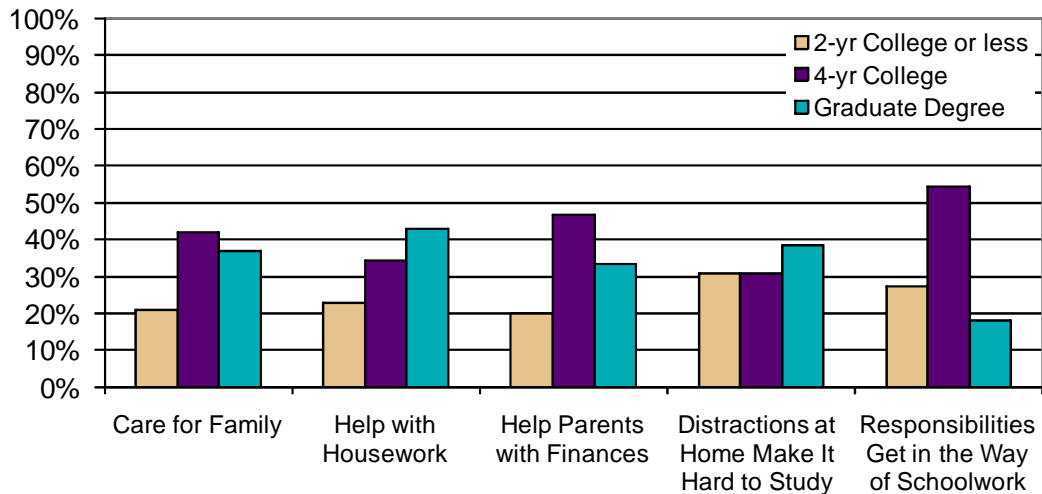
**Figure 9. Family Obligations by Nativity, 2009-10 Seniors (n=215)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

Despite the potential for family obligations to distract students from completing their school work, as found by Fuligni et al. (1999), family obligations can also be a source of pride and a reflection of maturity for many Latino youth, especially the foreign-born. Thus, we find that students with more family obligations tend to aspire to complete a 4-year college degree or more (Figure 10) and that foreign-born youth reported that these responsibilities interfere less with school (Figure 9) than their U.S.-born peers reported.

**Figure 10. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Family Obligations (n=214)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

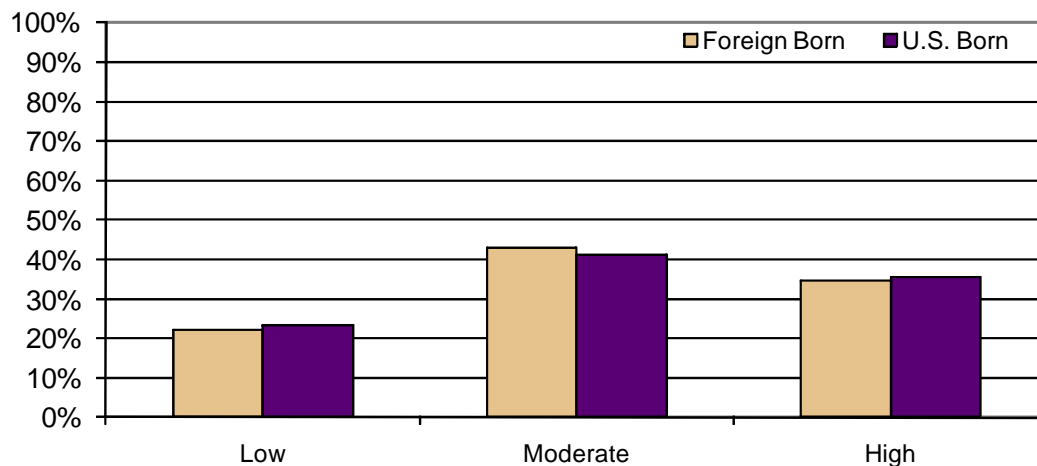
### Perceived Discrimination

Though family obligations can sometimes promote academic success and aspirations, discrimination negatively affects schooling. Past research has found that discrimination obstructs immigrants' acculturation process (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006), decreases overall mental health (Gonzales, Fabrett, & Knight, 2009; Hwang & Goto, 2008), and hinders students' formation of supportive social relationships with family members, teachers, and peers (Garcia Coll, & Szalacha, 2004; Kuperminc et al., 2009; Vega & Rumbaut, 1991). We measured the perception of discrimination based on students' responses to four hypothetical situations (e.g., the teacher will not select me because of my race, or the store clerk is suspicious of me because of my race) developed by Mendoza-Denton et al. (2002).

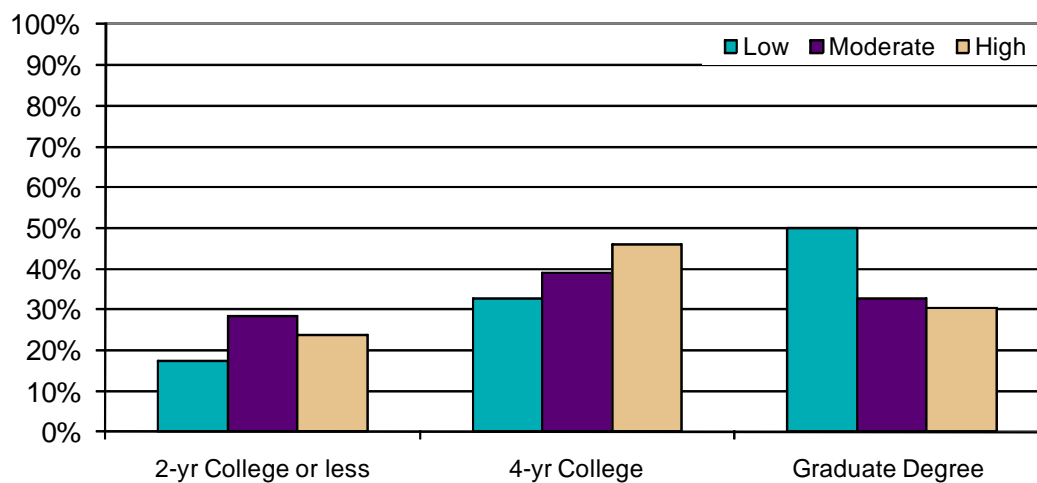
We found that the perception of moderate to high levels of discrimination among those who stayed in school declined between their freshman and senior years from 84% to 71%.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of both foreign-born (78%) and U.S.-born (77%) students still reported moderate to high perceptions of discrimination in their schools and communities during their senior year (Figure 11). Moreover, those who perceived moderate to high levels of discrimination were somewhat more likely to aspire to only a 2-year college degree or less and less likely to aspire to a graduate degree (Figure 12).

<sup>5</sup> Data are from the longitudinal sample. The % reporting discrimination in the larger cross-sectional sample of seniors is higher.

**Figure 11. Perceived Likelihood of Discrimination by Nativity, 2009-10 Seniors (n=219)**



**Figure 12. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Perceptions of Discrimination (n=214)**

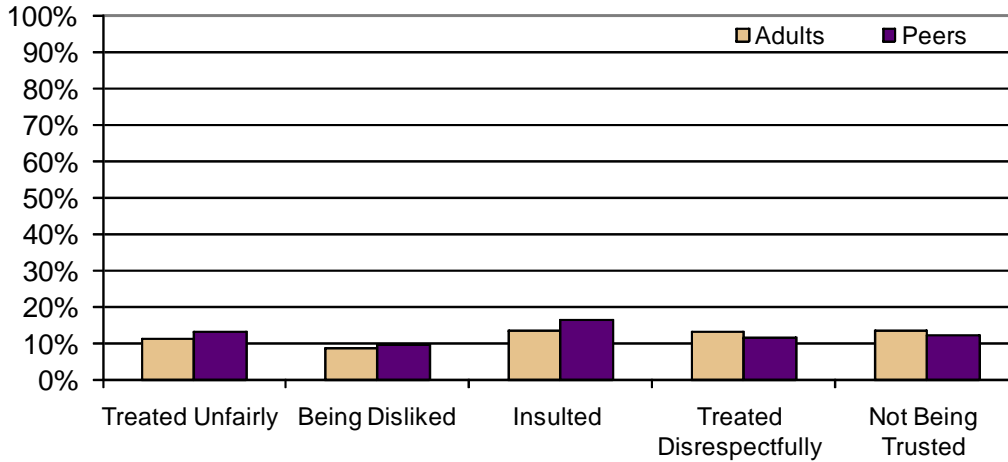


Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

In addition to perceiving discrimination in their schools and communities, many seniors also reported directly experiencing ethnic discrimination from both adults and peers at their schools. In the past year, 41 % of Latino high school seniors indicated that, due to their ethnicity they had been treated unfairly, insulted or called names, threatened or harassed, or were disliked, treated

disrespectfully, not trusted, or feared because of their ethnicity. According to the youth interviewed, both peers and adults at school discriminated against them frequently (Figure 13).

**Figure 13. Students' Perceptions of Discrimination by Source of Discrimination, 2009-10 Seniors (n=213)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

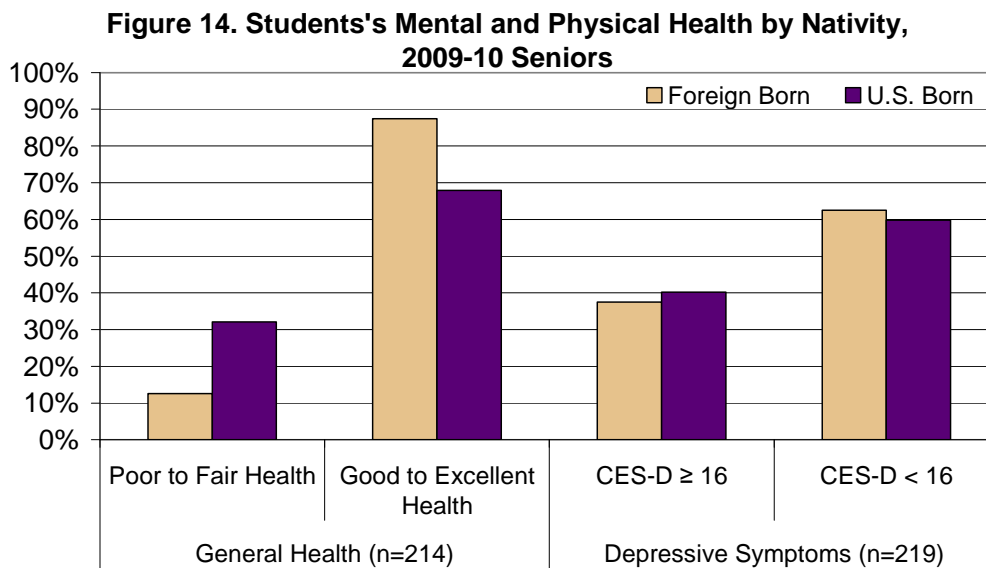
## FACTORS PROMOTING SCHOOL SUCCESS

While the Latino students in our study faced challenges to academic success, they also had supports to help them overcome these challenges. Latino students find strength and resilience in their personal health, their ethnic identities, their families, and their teachers.

### Personal Health

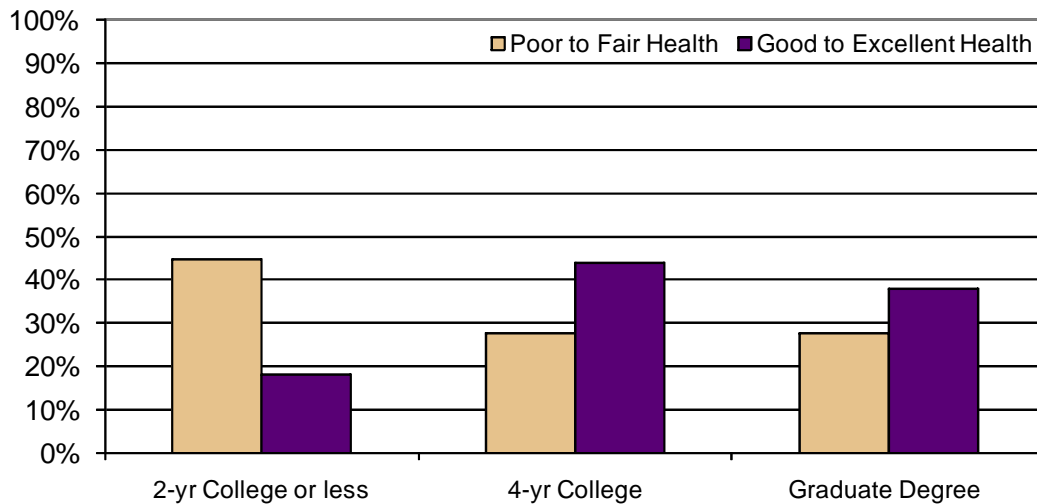
Poor health was not a concern for most Latino students. Despite the many challenges and hardships they encountered, over two-thirds of both foreign-born (87%) and U.S.-born (68%) Latino 12<sup>th</sup> graders ranked their general health as good to excellent (Figure 14). However, many (38% of foreign-born and 40% of U.S.-born) struggled with depressive symptoms (CESD $\geq$ 16; Radloff, 1977).

Poor physical and mental health can impair students' academic performance and reduce their academic aspirations (Fletcher, 2008; Kao, 1999). Thus, we found that Latino students who completed high school reported improved physical health between their freshman (70%) and senior years (74%). Moreover, Latino students in good to excellent physical health were more likely to aspire to a 4-year college degree or more; whereas students in poorer physical health were focused only on completing high school and possibly a 2-year college degree (Figure 15).



Note: Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) equals 16 or more when children have depressive symptoms.

**Figure 15. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by General Self-Reported Health (n=213)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

### **Ethnic Identity**

A strong ethnic identity can be a valuable resource for students and can buttress their self-esteem against discrimination (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Mossakowski, 2003), and everyday stressors (Kiang et al, 2006).

Though ethnic identity can be measured in many ways, here we consider the ethnic *label* that students chose to adopt. As suggested by our qualitative interviews with students, the choice of an ethnic label is not easy for Latino youth. Labels such as Hispanic, Latino, and Hispanic American are intrinsically American concepts. Thus, a hyphenated-American or pan-ethnic identity can reflect greater acculturation to the U.S. (Fuligni et al., 2008). At the same time, a country-of-origin identity can reflect a strong sense of pride in one's heritage.

In describing how she decided to adopt a hyphenated-American identity, Jennifer emphasizes her legal status. R: Well, I'm part American and Hispanic. The American part [...] I'm a U.S. citizen. I'm legal here. And I'll vote and if something comes up. [...] My momma is white and my grandma's from Alabama. [...] So, I'm part Caucasian and part American and Hispanic.

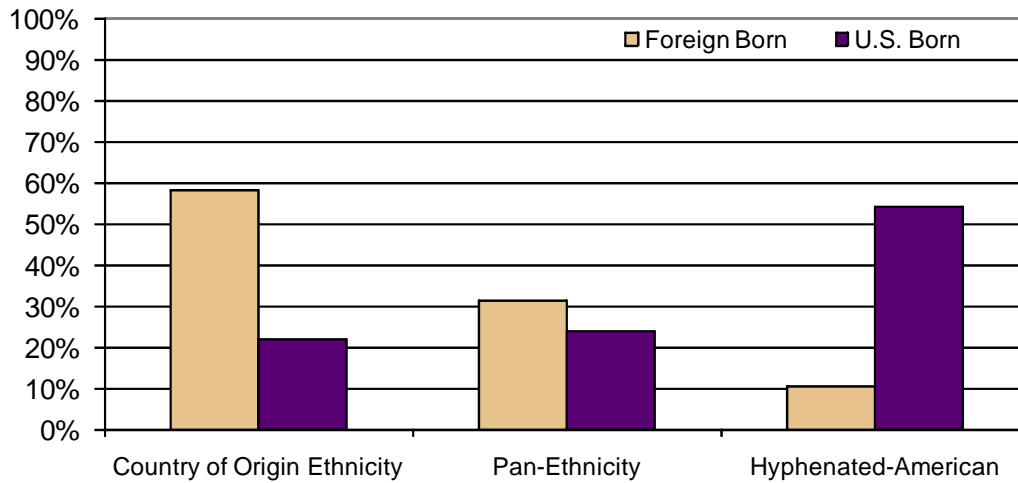
**[Jennifer, U.S. born, ID 510036s]**

While Jennifer's mixed ethnic heritage and U.S. citizenship led her to adopt a hyphenated American identity, Cecilia's pride in her heritage leads her to retain a country-of-origin identity. She states, "I just say, 'I'm Mexican.' I don't like to classify myself as just American because I am really proud of my Mexican heritage."

**[Cecilia, U.S. born, ID 120631a]**

About 40% of Latino high school students (60% of foreign-born and 20% of US born) retained their country-of origin identity (Figure 16). However, like Jennifer, a plurality (54%) of U.S.-born students selected a hyphenated-American ethnic label such as Mexican-American, illustrating that they are highly acculturated to the U.S. (Figure 16).

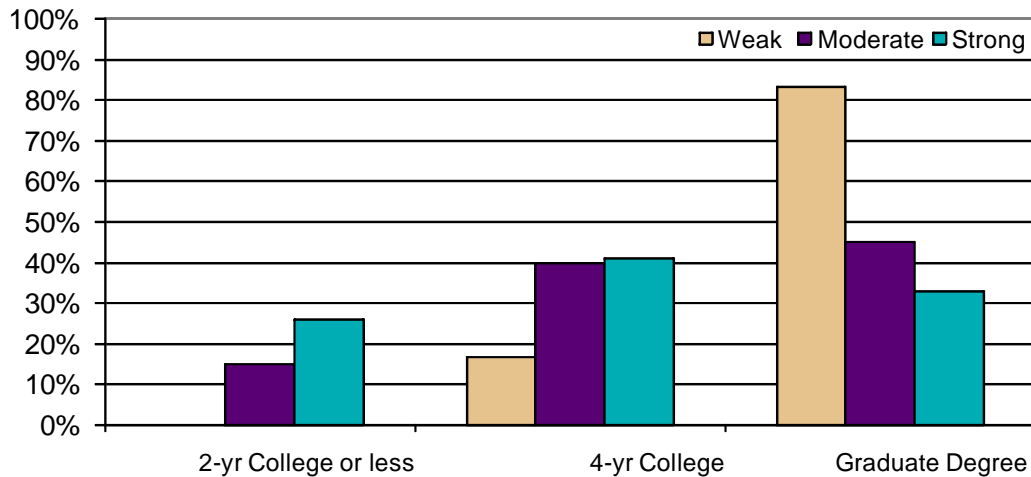
**Figure 16. Ethnic Label by Nativity Status, 2009-10 Seniors (n=192)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

Although the foreign-born were more likely to use a country-of-origin identity label, we found no strong relationship between the labels used by youth and their academic aspirations. However, our data did suggest a slight negative relationship between the strength of students' ethnic identifications as measured by Phinney (1992) and their academic aspirations. This contrasts with previous research showing that students' strong ethnic identifications are positively associated with higher motivations (Fuglini, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005), higher quality of life (Utsey et al., 2002), greater enrollment in college (Chavous et al., 2003), and stronger feelings of academic efficacy (Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001). In our study, few students (N=6) indicated weak ethnic identifications. But, those students with weak ethnic identifications aspired to 4-year college and graduate degrees while student with strong ethnic identifications aspired to 2-year or 4-year college degrees (Figure 17). Students with weak ethnic identifications also tended to be U.S. born students with hyphenated-American identities. Students with strong ethnic identifications tended to be foreign-born students with country-of-origin identities. Thus, their educational aspirations may be diminished by their more limited financial access to 4-year colleges.

**Figure 17. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Sense of Ethnic Identity (n=214)**

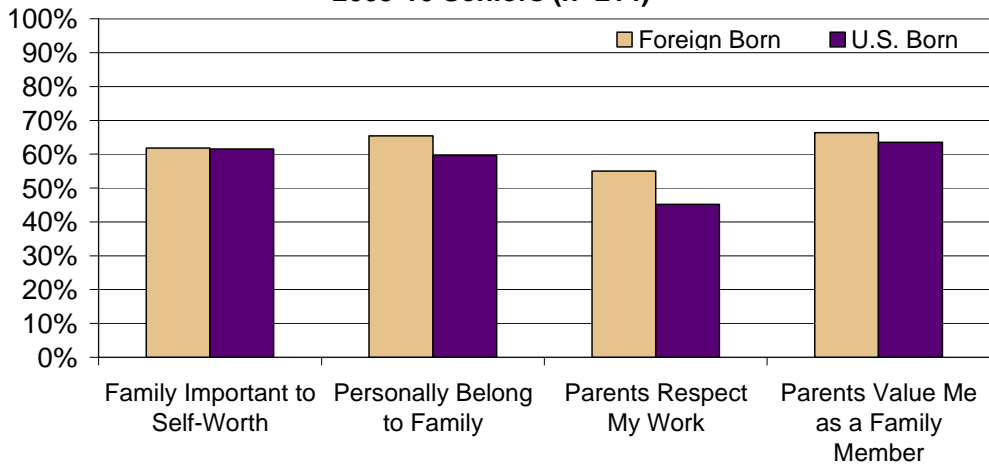


Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

### **Family Identification**

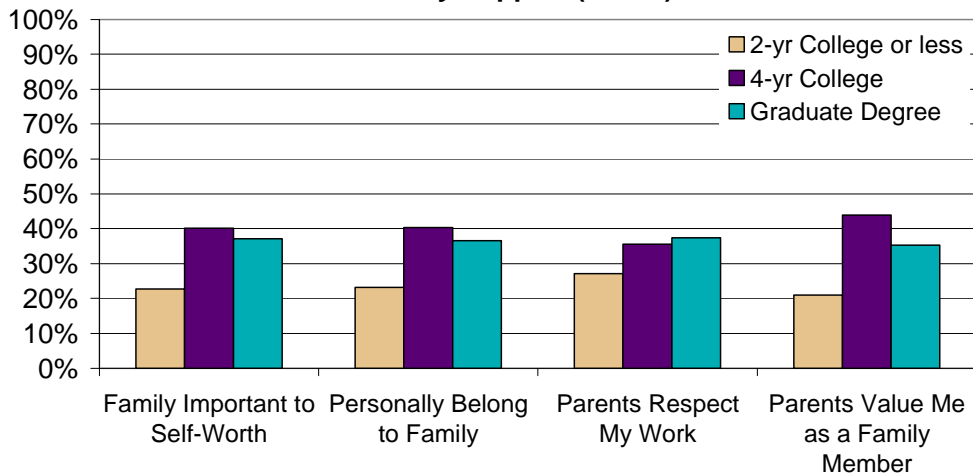
Though ethnic identification differed significantly by nativity, family identification did not (Figure 18). Both foreign-born and U.S.-born Latino youth felt valued and respected by their families. This strong sense of family identity can help Latino youth confront the challenges of acculturation and protect them from negative social influences such as discrimination (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Coohy, 2001; Padilla & Duran, 1995). Most importantly, these strong family ties can help foster high academic aspirations in Latino youth. As shown in Figure 19, students who had stronger senses of family belonging and support had higher academic aspirations than those with a weaker sense of family belonging and support.

**Figure 18. Family Identity Indicators by Nativity Status, 2009-10 Seniors (n=214)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

**Figure 19. Seniors' Academic Aspirations, by Experiences of Family Support (n=213)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

Our qualitative interviews strongly reflected the importance of family identification and support to the academic aspirations of Latino youth. As summarized by Maria and José, parents continually reminded their children of the importance of completing an education and, though they faced financial hardships, many parents did not let their children get jobs while they were attending high school. They believed that work would distract their children from school.

R: I wanted to go to the fields because I would hear people talking about, ‘oh, I went to the fields this summer, like last summer.’ And I was like, I’ve never worked. I’ve never done anything like that. But my mom never wanted us to do that because she says that some people start working too young, and they like money more than education. So she didn’t want the same thing for us. [...] A lot of people that I know, they’re like, ‘well, I’m not getting any money from going to school. Why don’t I just get a job? And that’s what they do -- just drop out and get a job.

[Maria, Foreign-born, ID 46040a]

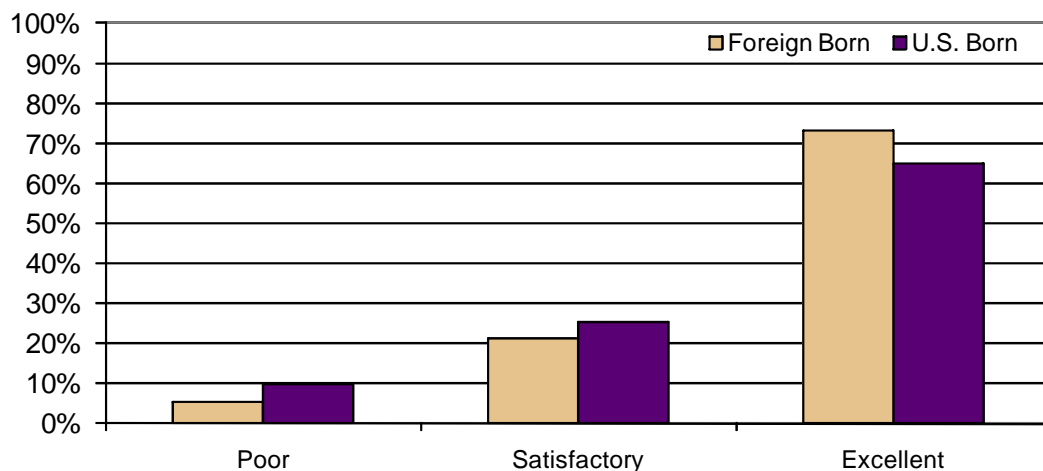
R: Well, my parents kind of talked to me about it, and they said they’re afraid that it might take away from my focus on school. That I might decide that working is a pretty good deal. I get money, and I’ll probably end up quitting school.

[José, U.S. born, ID 23009a]

### Teacher Support

In addition to family, adult role models at school can play a significant role in promoting the academic aspirations of youth and helping them overcome the challenges associated with acculturation (Degarmo & Martinez, 2006). Based on students’ answers to questions about whether adults at their schools treated them fairly, respected their ideas, respected the work they did, valued their contributions, and valued the individual student, we classified teacher support as poor, satisfactory, or excellent (Tyler & Degoey, 1995).

**Figure 20. Relationships with Adults in School by Nativity Status, 2009-10 Seniors (n=211)**

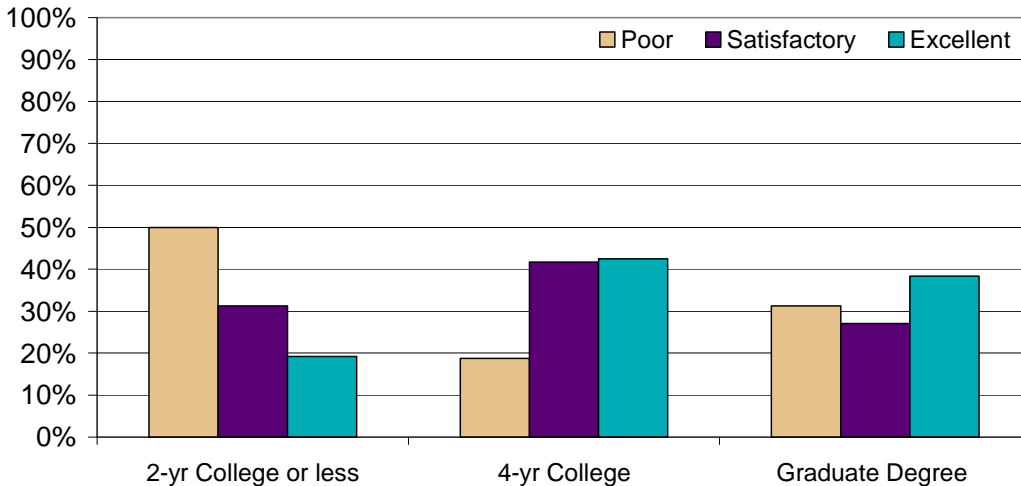


Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

We found that the majority of foreign-born (73%) and U.S.-born (65%) students had excellent relationships with adults in their schools (Figure 20). In addition, most (69%) Latino seniors

reported having someone to turn to other than their parents for advice about college, careers, or future plans. These positive relationships potentially helped both foreign- and U.S.-born students overcome obstacles to their educational success. Students who reported poorer relationships with adults in their schools tended to have lower academic aspirations (Figure 21).

**Figure 21. Seniors' Aspirations, by Relationships with Adults in School (n=210)**



Note: Sample size (n) less than 219 due to missing values.

When asked what helped them succeed in high school, students such as Josefina and Alex who participated in our qualitative interviews, often identified key teachers and guidance counselors.

R: I guess my teachers. From middle school they told me to take honors courses. And I was like, “Are you sure?” They’re like, “Yeah.” So they gave me a little push to take honors. And it wasn’t that bad, so that’s why I kept on taking them.

**[Josefina, U.S. born, ID 24009a]**

R: My counselor, she’s the same counselor my brother had, Ms. [X], she like helped my brother out when he had problems. Same with me. She’s really supportive. I think she’s a really good counselor. Actually, she’s really helpful. She helped me with college.

**[Alex, Foreign-born, ID 110561a]**

Unfortunately, not all teachers and guidance counselors provide support to their students. As described by Rockelle, when Latino students cannot find support from teachers or guidance counselors, they must rely on their own efforts to learn about college and other aspects of school.

I: And have you contacted anyone there or talked to a guidance counselor [...] at your school [to learn about what you need to do to go to college]?

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R: No. My guidance counselor, I don't get along with her. So I try to get every information that I get from the internet. [...] Whenever I go talk to [my guidance counselor], she's like, no, you can't do this. No, you can't do this. And I know I can. So. I'll be like, 'no, I'll do it myself.'

**[Rockelle, Foreign-born, ID 12021a]**

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## CONCLUSIONS

This final school report illustrates that Latino students, both foreign- and U.S.-born, are highly motivated to achieve. Furthermore, students have high aspirations for their academic futures. However, some Latino students encounter a myriad of obstacles that could prevent them from actually achieving their academic goals.

Concerns about school belonging, family economic hardships, family obligations, and perceived discrimination stifle the educational success of Latino youth. They diminish students' motivation and decrease their ability to function well at school. Simultaneously, many Latino students show resilience and develop support systems to minimize the effects of stressors and threats to their school performance. A strong family support, good general health, and teacher support help students stay focused and work towards achieving their academic aspirations.

Schools and teachers play an important role in helping new immigrant communities overcome educational obstacles, expand their support networks, and achieve success academically. By following a few key recommendations, schools can assist Latino students in making their academic aspirations a reality.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

**School administrators, principals, and teachers should work closely with parents and keep them updated on school functions and provide them with ways to actively participate in school events. This will help motivate and encourage students to pursue high academic aspirations and increase their student achievement.**

Parents are a significant factor in motivating Latino students due to the strong familial bonds among immigrant families. However, as students become more assimilated, their relationships with other family members tend to weaken.

**Develop cultural awareness workshops for school faculty and staff to provide information on the unique stressors and obstacles Latino students and their parents face. Suggest solutions to faculty and staff on how to best help Latino students confront these challenges.**

While most Latino students felt positively about their school belonging, a significant amount of Latino students still did not. Stereotypes persist among both non-Latino students and teachers, which continue to create a negative school environment for some Latino students. Well done workshops can refute these stereotypes and facilitate discussion, which will provide teachers with the opportunity to share similar teaching challenges and effective solutions to these challenges. Additionally, these workshops could be used to create best practices in developing positive relationships among Latino and non-Latino students as well as with teachers. Through personal and educational encouragement, teachers can build strong relationships with Latino students and in turn, further these students' future prospects.

**Provide a quiet place for students to study at school such as an empty classroom, school library, or space in a community center. This area should be kept open before, during, and after school.**

Whether students reported high or low academic aspirations, they consistently reported that distractions at home made it difficult for them to study. Furthermore, numerous family obligations made it challenging to find time to study. By providing a place at school with extended hours, students can know that if they have difficulty studying at home, they can always find a quiet place to study at school.

**Actively encourage cultural understanding among all students by developing opportunities to learn about and study world histories and offer students opportunities to positively engage with different ethnic and racial groups in their schools.**

For Latino students in North Carolina, a new receiving community, discrimination by both peers and adults is a significant concern that has serious detrimental effects on academic aspirations and achievement. While schools cannot always prevent discrimination, they can promote cultural understanding among students through school activities. In-class projects and extracurricular activities help students share their cultural backgrounds and disprove stereotypes.

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**Develop or expand free and reduced price school lunch and breakfast programs.**

One of the most prominent financial difficulties Latino students encounter is food scarcity. Many students cannot count on having three meals every day. Schools can help mitigate food concerns by providing free or reduced priced lunch and breakfast services for low-income students. Furthermore, these programs should be as stigma-free as possible, so that students will not be embarrassed to use them.

**Provide both counseling information and services to Latino students to cultivate students' academic and personal development.**

The majority of Latino students had high aspirations but do not know how to make their aspirations a reality. Some have a limited and distorted understanding of the U.S. educational system. Others do not realize the myriad of options they have available to them after they graduate from high school. Because many students do not know the right questions to ask, schools need to proactively offer this information. Furthermore, not only do students need academic support, but they also need emotional and personal guidance. Over a third of the SIAA respondents exhibited some symptoms of depression. Adults at school, including guidance counselors, school social workers, teachers, staff, and administrators can play an important role in assisting Latino youth with their personal development.

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## **LIMITATIONS**

Some limitations to our study should be acknowledged. First, this study employs a school-based sample. Thus, youth who immigrate to the U.S. and never attend school or youth who drop out of school before beginning high school are not included in our study. Second, the findings and conclusions are based on unweighted data. Some changes may result from weighting the data. Finally, these results are mostly correlational. As our research continues, more advanced statistical analyses will determine the strength and depth of the thematic trends identified in this report.

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## NOTES

- (1) Please refer all questions regarding this study to the Principal Investigator, Krista M. Perreira.
- (2) More information on this study can be found on the web at [www.unc.cpc.edu/projects/siaa](http://www.unc.cpc.edu/projects/siaa). As additional publications and data become available, they will be disseminated through this website.