

Pursuing Higher Education

Exploring the Gendered Trajectories of Oxnard's Latina/o Young Adults

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Introduction



Oxnard's population of over 200,000 residents includes many who are of Latina/o, immigrant, and indigenous origin, and an increasing number of the city's young Latina/o residents are attending college, with many beginning their postsecondary education at the local community college. Because we know that a college degree can offer significant opportunities for jobs that provide a living wage and benefits like health care, it is important to account for how gender shapes the experiences of Latina/o young adults as they pursue a college education. Recognizing the importance of how the experiences of males and females can differ, this report seeks to inform local efforts to facilitate the upward mobility of Oxnard's Latina and Latino residents who are eighteen to thirty-four years of age.

This report presents findings from 2,405 surveys and 70 in-depth interviews conducted in 2023 for the Thriving Youth Study led by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Students' responses provide an overview of the educational experiences of Oxnard's Latina/o young adults. The report examines high school and GED attainment, postsecondary expectations and outcomes, and the experiences of this group of young adults as they attempt to navigate the pathway to earning a bachelor's degree.

It is important to acknowledge that gender is not binary, that analyses that consider only those who identify as male or female have limitations, and that queer Latina/o young adults face significant challenges that are unique to their lived experience. The number of nonbinary young adults in our sample, however, was too small to provide a reliable analysis of their response, and they are not included in this report.

Our report presents two main conclusions about the educational challenges faced by Oxnard's Latina/o young adult residents.

- 1. Latinas have significantly high aspirations for going to college, yet too few earn a degree.** A disconnect exists between the educational aspirations of Latina/os and the reality of degree attainment, with patterns differing by gender. To ensure that Latina/os have the preparation to realize their educational aspirations, educators and counselors must take these patterns into consideration when seeking to promote students' transition to the next level of education, whether that is to a community college or a four-year institution.
- 2. Latinas often have caregiving roles that affect their college and career prospects.** Caregiving includes performing household chores, caring for younger siblings, and attending to elderly or chronically ill grandparents/parents. This care is essential in many low-income immigrant families because undocumented status limits job opportunities for parents, forcing them to hold multiple jobs and/or work long hours. Many respondents reported that they were caregivers for family members, and Latinas were disproportionately responsible for this work.

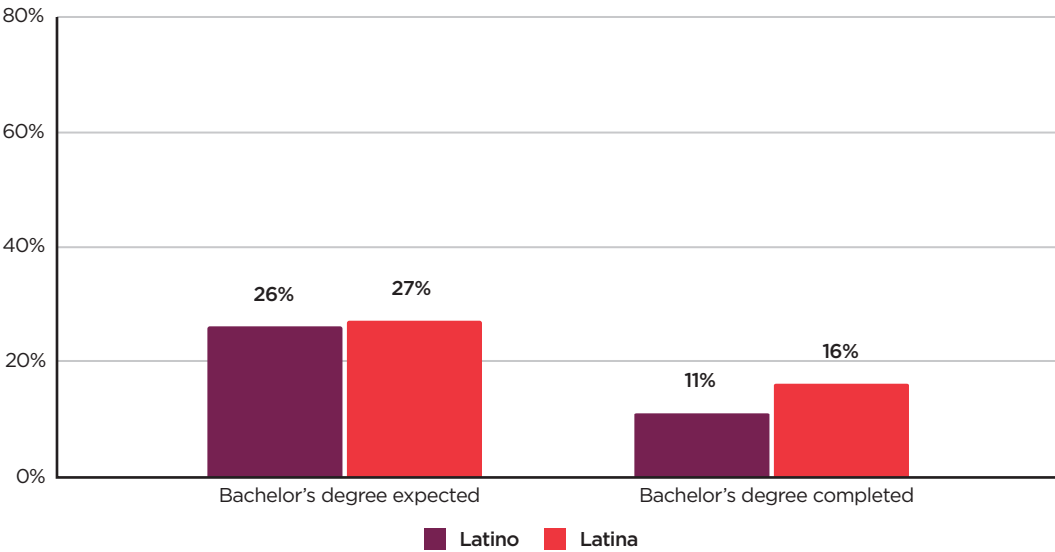
This report presents evidence of some of the obstacles that Oxnard’s Latina/o young adults confront and offers recommendations for Oxnard’s educators and municipal leaders. By pursuing these recommendations, Oxnard can take affirmative steps to promote residents’ educational success and set a model for other Latina/o-dominant cities.

Educational Aspirations of Latina/o Young Adults



In our survey, 27 percent of Latina/o respondents reported having a bachelor’s degree. Latinas were more likely than Latinos to obtain this degree (16 percent and 11 percent, respectively). Survey results suggest that many Latina/o residents desire to further their education. This is especially true of Latinas: 27 percent expected to attain a bachelor’s degree, while 26 percent of Latinos expected to do so (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Education Aspirations and Attainment of Oxnard’s Latina/o Young Adults by Gender, 2023



Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

There are several reasons why women may have higher aspirations and greater degree attainment than men. For example, class placement practices in K-12 schools, known as tracking, influence academic achievement by exposing higher-tracked students to a college-level curriculum and high expectations. In comparison to Latino high school students, Latinas are more often placed in classes that have higher academic expectations. In survey responses, 42 percent of Latinas reported taking honors or advanced placement classes, compared to 37 percent of Latinos. In addition, among Latina respondents, 59 percent

reported receiving receiving B grades or higher, compared to 38 percent of Latinos. Yet, despite a desire to continue pursuing their education, many Latinas encountered significant challenges that interrupted their path toward earning a bachelor's degree.



Challenges That Hinder Educational Attainment

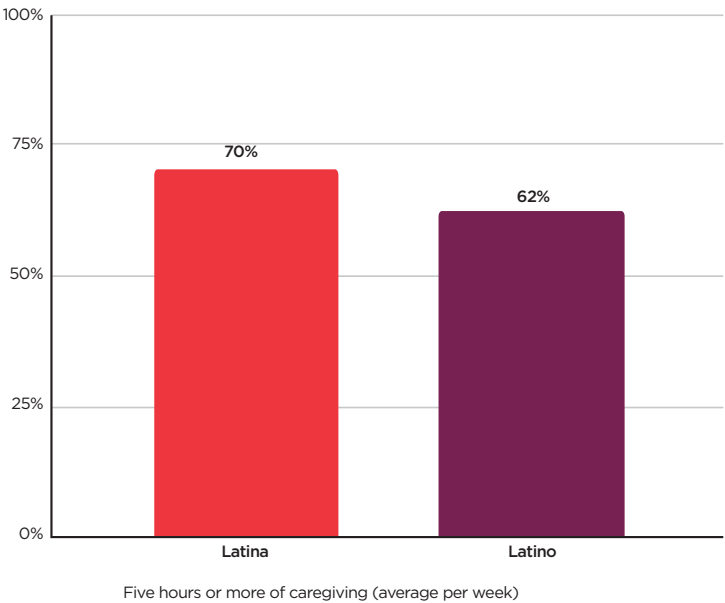


Latina/o survey respondents may have high aspirations, but most are not enrolled in school. Among respondents, 73.4 percent of Latinas and 82.9 percent of Latinos were not enrolled at the time of the survey. Further, a majority—51.3 of Latinas and 50.1 percent of Latinos—had earned a high school diploma or GED and had some college credit. We know that young people without a college degree tend to face significant economic challenges because many of the jobs available to them do not offer a living wage or benefits like health insurance and retirement. Although a college degree does not guarantee financial stability, it does provide access to job opportunities that can provide social mobility for young adults and their families.

One of the significant challenges that Latina/o young adults face is linked to their family responsibilities. As detailed in a separate report, economic well-being indicators point to financial challenges experienced by Oxnard residents, suggesting that Latina/o young adults feel significant pressure to help their families. Given the low citizenship rates among immigrants, it is likely that many Latina/o young adults live in mixed-status families. These families are likely to have significant financial challenges because finding stable jobs with good pay is difficult. To cover the family's basic living expenses, parents often work long hours and/or multiple jobs. As a consequence, many Latina/o young adults take on caregiving or work responsibilities to help their parents.

Caregiving responsibilities in particular are a gendered experience. Of survey respondents, 70 percent of Latinas, compared to 62 percent of Latinos, spent an average of five or more hours each week taking care of family members (fig. 2). In Latina/o households, reproductive labor, the unpaid work at home that supports a family, is commonly assigned to women. Young girls are often socialized to internalize these expectations, and as they get older, they are likely to take on caregiving responsibilities within their parents’ home and with extended family.

Figure 2. Caregiving Responsibilities of Oxnard’s Latina/o Young Adults by Gender, 2023



Source: Thriving Youth Study, 2023

In follow-up interviews, young Latinas detailed many reasons for taking on caregiving work. For example, Angela (pseudonym) explained, “My aunt, she works a lot. So she relies on me giving the kids rides to school, to pick them up, help them with homework. They might need extra support.” For immigrant-origin families, the high cost of living requires that parents work beyond an eight-hour shift, leaving the responsibilities of childcare to older siblings or cousins, especially those who are young women. As a result, their time to participate in support programs at school or to continue their education is severely restricted. Many Latina/o young adults find that their desire to attain a college degree is constrained not only by economic hardship but also the lack of affordable care for children and elders.



Greater Guidance and College Knowledge Is Necessary



Because their parents may not have much, or any, experience engaging with postsecondary institutions, many Latina/o students need significant guidance as they navigate applying for and attending college. Ninety-one percent of survey respondents reported that they did not have a parent with a bachelor's degree.

Latina/o young adults who enroll in college encounter various difficulties that can jeopardize their attainment of a college degree. Among the most important is the difficulty of obtaining adequate guidance that provides clear information about the types of resources and support available on college campuses, including financial aid, tutoring, and physical and mental health services. Students' awareness of campus support services is critical because it is the first step to using the assistance that is available to help them achieve their goals. A Latina student entering as a freshman at a four-year institution explained, "I remember when I came for Admitted Days, I was so lost . . . Oh, I didn't even know where the parking lot was or anything like that or financial aid . . . And I remember being so scared because just that helplessness." Academic support and assistance with applying for financial aid are among the most critical services for Latina/o students, particularly because most tend to be first-generation college students who come from immigrant working-class families.

It is important to recognize the existing services in Oxnard that have a track record of supporting the achievement of Latina/o students. For example, programs such as Oxnard College's Educational Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) provide targeted services and support to low-income and underrepresented students to promote their retention and attainment. Latina/o students also benefit from career counseling, which can help them

successfully complete the two to three years of community college needed to transfer to a four-year institution. In follow-up interviews, study respondents detailed the impact of campus services. For instance, Josh (pseudonym) stated that prior to joining Oxnard College's Educational Assistance Center (EAC), a program aimed at supporting students with disabilities, he struggled to see an academic counselor. His complicated work schedule made it difficult to secure an appointment in the evening, when limited appointments were available. Josh found the help he needed at EAC, which had "their own counselors that are a lot more available because there's not too many students in this program . . . I have my own team of counselors that I can go to now." Josh's experience demonstrates the critical need for specialized services tailored to students. Many students rely on connecting with support programs' staff and faculty, who can refer students to other resources on campus. Access to staff and faculty who are committed to assisting students is necessary, as evidenced by data from the Oxnard Thriving Youth Study. These findings show that a significant percentage of students do not know where to find campus support services. Awareness of available campus services and resources is critical to assisting Latina/o students succeed in college.



Conclusion



The findings in this report show that Latina/o young adult respondents aspired to thrive and sought opportunities to do so, yet most were not enrolled in school. For many, their pursuit of a college education was complicated by family care responsibilities and limited access to programs that provide affordable childcare and senior care. While most Latina/o respondents did not have children, the financial challenges their own parents faced often meant that they needed to step in to help by either entering the labor market or providing

care for family members, particularly younger siblings or cousins—or both. It is critical to acknowledge that the educational barriers that Latina/o young adults experience have significant consequences for their social mobility and that of their families.

The findings also show that while in college, Latina/o young adults sought services tailored to their needs from organizations such as EOPS and from counselors who could meet with them individually. However, because many Latina/o students had to work as well as attend school, their ability to attend academic counseling services offered during the nine-to-five workday was limited. The time constraints affected their success. In particular, Latinas were often responsible for taking care of family members, which restricted the time they had to access available resources. Oxnard's future growth rests in its investment in Latina/o young adults. Key is the creation of opportunities and support structures that will ensure that they can thrive in school and work.

Recommendations for Educators and Municipal Leaders



The following recommendations are designed to improve and advance awareness of the services that are available to Oxnard's Latina/o young adult residents. They focus on increasing students' use of available resources, which range from academic counseling to community outreach from organizations that work with struggling families. The recommendations are directed to administrators of area high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions and Oxnard's municipal leaders.

Colleges and Universities

- **Increase the availability of academic counseling at two-year and four-year institutions.** Expand students' access to academic counseling by offering individual sessions or informational workshops outside of working hours. Train student interns to develop and facilitate peer-to-peer workshops that will help students navigate curricular requirements and utilize campus support services.

High Schools and Community Colleges

- **Improve mentoring opportunities in high schools and community colleges.** Increase collaborations that bring together academic counselors at local high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions with the goal of developing mentoring programs for high school and community college students. Mentors can help students find reliable information about pursuing a college degree, tap into networks of support for resources and services, and learn to navigate the bureaucracies of educational institutions. Mentoring networks could be expanded to include local nonprofit organizations such

as Future Leaders of America (FLA), Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP), Central Coast United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), and Buen Vecino. These groups work to support young people's success

City of Oxnard

- **Expand access to affordable childcare and senior care services.** Caretaking support is essential because it can allow Latina/o students to attend college and graduate. Oxnard's municipal leaders should expand awareness of the critical support structures available throughout Ventura County. One such program is NextGen, which provides services aimed at increasing youths' educational and career success.
- **Increase awareness of campus childcare services.** Continue current collaborations with Oxnard College and private partners that promote students' access to this vital resource. Expand eligibility of campus childcare programs to include students' young siblings.
- **Broaden awareness of county resources for caregivers.** One example is the Ventura County Human Services Agency, which provides in-home support to caregivers in Ventura County.

Expanding awareness about available resources can help Oxnard's Latina/o young adults take advantage of opportunities for local jobs offering good pay and/or continue their education at local community colleges. The recommendations point to the need for concerted efforts that strengthen effective communication between city offices, school leaders, and local community organizations that serve the needs of struggling families. Critically, implementation of these recommendations will not necessarily require additional or new funding.



Photographs courtesy of Oxnard College.

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