

HISPANIC¹ STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES AND TRANSFER SUCCESS

Overview

Students of color, particularly Hispanic students, experience inequitable outcomes in postsecondary education endeavors—such as transfer and graduation rates—compared to their white counterparts (Shapiro et al., 2018; Wang, 2020). The following brief summarizes a qualitative study of the use of high-impact practices of two large community colleges in the southern region of the United States and explores how engagement in these experiential learning practices before transferring to a 4-year institution influenced GPA, persistence, and completion rates after transfer.

Introduction

This study explored how service-learning and study abroad participation shaped the experiences of Hispanic transfer students. Baccalaureate degree attainment is increasingly important if “higher education [is to] be a game changer for Latino students’ mobility” (Martinez & Santiago, 2020, p. 12) and if the professions are to be diversified (Shugart, 2019). High-impact practices (HIPs)—highly-engaging, hands-on, educationally purposeful activities that increase student engagement and faculty-student interaction, such as service-learning and study abroad—have been found to lead to transfer success markers such as higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates (Bradley et al., 2015; Kuh, 2016; Kuh & Kinzie, 2018; Kuh et al., 2017). Researchers have discovered a positive effect of HIPs upon Hispanic students who participate, but this demographic is less likely to engage in these activities compared to their white peers (Harper, 2009; Kuh & Kinzie, 2018; Sweat et al., 2013) and—despite indicating their intent to transfer in large numbers—are less likely to successfully transition to the university (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Del Real Viramontes, 2020; Rendón et al., 2014).

I framed the study with theories of student engagement (Kuh, 2001) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to understand the powerful effect of HIPs when taking into consideration Hispanic student assets and strengths. Findings from the study suggested that Hispanic students bring family support and cultural pride to the community college which, when integrated with study abroad and service-learning participation, leads to a more positive transition experience to the 4-year institution. Findings also showed community college students who participate in these educationally purposeful and experiential activities at their community college were more likely to experience transfer success in the form of higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates at the university, as self-reported by students in interviews.

[1] The term Hispanic used throughout this study mirrors the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) definition “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021, Race/ethnicity section).

Recommendations and implications are then suggested for community colleges that serve Hispanic students. Equitable transfer success is the mutual responsibility of both 2- and 4-year institutions, but the goal of this brief is to focus recommendations on research-informed policies and practices at the community college.

This research is valuable in that not only are Hispanic students more likely to start their college education at a community college than at 4-year institutions, but Hispanic students who have rich educational experiences outside the classroom are more likely to be successful in their transfer experience as compared to others that transfer. Thereby, they are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Martinez & Santiago, 2020).

Key Points

- Students engaged in study abroad and service-learning at the community college were able to experience transfer success at the university (e.g., higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates) due to supportive families and cultural pride.
- Participating in HIPs at the community college—such as service-learning and study abroad—gave students meaningful experiences that propelled them toward transfer to the university and enabled them to realize they could make an impact on others' lives.
- Colleges had structures and systems in place—such as dedicated programming offices, adequate staffing for advising, and engaged leadership which invested in creating supportive resources—that removed barriers to student participation in HIPs.
- Students were more likely to participate in HIPs at the community college when institutional resources and programs were adapted to provide greater access and designed to overcome challenges.
- Students recalled strong engagement in multiple HIPs and co-curricular opportunities at the community college which contributed to a more successful transfer experience to the university. They accumulated assets and strengths that built perseverance capital and established a strong cultural identity as a result of their engagement.

Data Collection and Analysis

During Spring 2021, I interviewed current and former students, as well as faculty/staff liaisons² and reviewed documents and artifacts from Tuttle Community College (TCC) and Hamlin College—both pseudonyms for large community colleges in the southern region of the United States.

Current and former students were eligible for the study based on their participation in either study abroad or service-learning while at TCC or Hamlin (e.g., two of at least eight or nine HIPs offered by the respective college). Twenty TCC participants (ten students, seven former students, and three liaisons) and 17 Hamlin participants (fourteen students, one former student, and two liaisons) provided data in 1-hour, semi-structured focus groups and interviews which was coded and analyzed for patterns and themes.

[2] Faculty/staff liaisons were identified on each college and university campus. These study abroad, service-learning, or transfer experts assisted in recruiting students and provided an insider lens through which to view, access, and understand programming at the institution.

Highlights from Focus Group and Interview Data

Focus groups revealed several key points, among them the finding that a supportive family and strong cultural pride made a difference in a student's transfer success at TCC (e.g., higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates). Marcus Wade reflected on the power of *familismo* ("family first"): "They've been along on the train the whole ride ... they're supportive no matter what and they know that it's going to be a challenge for me and they're going to be here to help me no matter what."

Hamlin student Don Diego de la Vega recollected, "I had a hard time trying to adapt to the new language and the culture ... [but] if you see someone from your own country, it gets you close to home and to them," even as Abi, also at Hamlin, elaborated "[During] the World Cup trials ... we would all wear our jerseys. When we see someone with the same jersey ... we would be like 'Oh my God!' It brings us closer knowing we're from the same country." Hispanic pride, like family support, enabled students to persist through the college experience with these assets in-hand and from a position of strength.

Students also spoke very easily of the transformative effect of high-impact practice participation throughout the interviews. Jasmine, a service-learning participant, conveyed, "I see my community differently ... I feel like I'm playing a part in the community ... I'm affecting other people's lives, which is a good feeling." Butterfly was equally effusive in her joy: "What I was learning there was for my [major], and I was able to see this is what I really want to do in my future ... I have so much to thank service-learning for, for giving me this opportunity [which led to a job]!"

Hannah reflected, "it just helped me dig deep within myself," while Hailey remembered that her service-learning experience "gave me that sense of what I was longing for." Natty O summarized, "[study abroad] impacted me, and I carry [it] in my heart every day." They echoed what most TCC and Hamlin students expressed, that their participation in study abroad or service-learning was a highly beneficial, life-changing experience.

The presence of structures and systems at TCC and Hamlin College encouraged HIPs participation. Hamlin College made a strong investment in the development of study abroad and service-learning communication resources: robust websites, high-quality recruitment flyers and brochures, training manuals, and faculty resources.

While no amount of communication is perfect, as one student lamented "a maze of going through a bunch of people," the majority of students concurred with Betty S's summary of her college's efforts: "[TCC] really likes to hold your hand all the way to the very last minute. They make things as easy as they can for students and everything as accessible as possible."



A TCC liaison reiterated, "advisors are extremely connected ... we establish that tight-knit relationship with them early on ... let's be honest, we nag you and try to keep you on track" while another liaison confirmed the value of leadership support: "We have deans [at TCC] that really get this [high-impact practices] work and support us—that makes all the difference ...our current president ... is also a champion of this." Senior leadership played a pivotal role in moving these practices forward; that backing proved critical in scaling HIPs and achieving systemic change.

Additionally, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hamlin faculty and staff were forced to innovate and adapt current resources and programs to retain and expand their effectiveness in a changing context. They redesigned Hamlin Global Scholars to accommodate distance learning, created several international partnerships that feature virtual exchanges and global guest speakers, and noted greater student participation than their previous/traditional model.

Similarly, Natasha (service-learning liaison) and her staff designed a hybrid service-learning experience that combined online and in-person service-learning delivery that could be used by more students post-pandemic—even if it was less transformative. The adapted experiences proved difficult for some students to navigate the online database or, like Crissy, were just "disappointed" in the not-quite-hands-on elements of the redesign. However, Taher exclaimed "the virtual service-learning ... has been really great!" and most students felt "incredibly lucky" (as sky did) to have the opportunity to serve their communities. Though the experiences might have been less life-changing than ideal, students recognized the inherent value of service-learning and study abroad experiences.



Another finding was the accumulation of experiences with which TCC students transferred to Riverside View University (RVU)—a pseudonym for their primary transfer university. Many students referred to participating in 3–5 HIPs in addition to involvement in student government, on-campus employment, or club leadership. This accumulated engagement wealth allowed them to overcome barriers and transfer with less transfer shock and higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates.

Rose, an alumna who was employed at TCC related her advice for other students, "If [you're] active in school, there's so many benefits." She connected her work-study job to navigating RVU with greater ease and less stress. Due to joining Phi Theta Kappa (the national community college honor society), running for student government, and participating in a domestic cross-cultural experience (a study abroad proxy, as she explained), Emile transferred with "way more confidence in myself." Valentina Romero, a highly engaged former Hamlin student, reflected, "I'm definitely much more secure in my cultural identity and proud of being a first-generation student." The ability to rely on their culture, be actively engaged, and push through challenges set-up these community college students for a transition experience that involved less transfer shock and heightened transfer success.



For Decision Makers: Impact on Practice & Policy

- **Build student capital**—their accumulation of assets and strengths—to overcome real or perceived barriers by including families where possible (e.g., offer a parent-student study abroad trip or family-friendly service-learning project). Encourage family involvement in recruitment, decision-making, and celebrating the completion of HIPs participation (e.g., a study abroad welcome-back dinner to which families are invited).
- **Create cultural affinity groups and organizations** (e.g., culture-based student groups that provide social capital-building opportunities). These groups could be sources of peer-based incentive to participate in HIPs as well as cosponsors for events and projects (e.g., service-learning in partnership with a local Hispanic non-profit or advocacy group).
- **Connect the transformative experiences** of HIPs with program- or major-specific opportunities. Students will more likely see the connection between course content and real-world application, particularly in careers they are pursuing. Combining HIPs, such as service-learning with internships, could compound transformative experiences for students and propel them into transfer-readiness based on increased confidence and persistence capital.
- **Provide multiple and frequent layers of communication.** Fine-tuning clarity about these programs and other college processes (e.g., FAFSA, transcripts, trip applications), particularly intra-office, reduces the number of hand-offs and a student's experience with mixed (or limited) messaging. Communicating how HIPs align with a college's strategic plan should ensure senior leadership support. Administrators can then identify and develop employees that have a passion for implementing and scaling HIPs.
- **Adapt in-person experiences** for the community college and post-pandemic contexts so that the transformative nature of HIPs is accessible to more students. Community colleges can develop alternate service-learning projects that emphasize civic engagement activities (e.g., voter registration or attending an online local government meeting) which depend less on in-person/on-site delivery. To make international learning more accessible, hybrid models of delivery could include virtual country visits alongside ethnic cooking demonstrations or interactive music/dance that is part of an in-person festival experience.
- **Design more opportunities for engagement** by leveraging existing partnerships with businesses and religious organizations within the Latin community. These experiences could be those where Hispanic students' culture can be an asset in meeting the outcome of the experience (e.g., translation, mentoring, leadership). Also, by adapting and offering the traditional work-based learning opportunity (e.g., on-the-job "internship" experiences—typically for career and technical education students—that often lead to future employment with the same company), what starts as a service-learning project could lead to employment (or paid internship) that services the students' own community. Having a strong cultural identity in place could reduce transfer shock for Hispanic students transferring to 4-year institutions.

Conclusion

The strength of TCC's and Hamlin's study abroad and service-learning programs was most apparent in the *testimonios*, or stories, by current and former student participants. Hispanic students who had strong family and cultural capital and participated in HIPs enjoyed some of the most transformative experiences. By providing a substantial structure and resources, albeit continuing to adapt them for a post-COVID-19 pandemic reality, the colleges increased HIPs accessibility so more students could participate—which in turn led them to more successful transfer experiences.

Former students who transferred to RVU with an accumulation of engagement experiences while at TCC and Hamlin referenced reduced transfer shock and increased student transfer success (e.g., higher GPA, greater semester-to-semester enrollment, and increased graduation rates). These findings are important because Hispanic students who participate in HIPs often report greater transfer success which increases the likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment and providing a better future for their families and communities (Tackling Transfer Advisory Board, 2021).



Brief Title

Hispanic Student Experiences with High-Impact Practices and Transfer Success

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About the Belk Center

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, at North Carolina State University, develops and sustains exceptional community college leaders who are committed to advancing equitable college access and student success, the social and economic mobility of their colleges' students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center provides professional development and research related to current and emerging student success opportunities and challenges facing community college leaders and policymakers in North Carolina and the nation. The Belk Center commits to dismantling systemic barriers to racial equity in education through evidence-based strategies that focus on the outcomes of Black, Latin* and American Indian students ([read our full Commitment to Equity here](#)).

About the John M. Belk Endowment

Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, the John M. Belk Endowment is a private family foundation committed to transforming postsecondary educational opportunities to meet North Carolina's evolving workforce needs. Its mission is aligned with the vision of its founder, the late John M. Belk who served four terms as mayor of Charlotte and was CEO of the department store company Belk, Inc. He created the John M. Belk Endowment in 1995 to fund a national merit scholarship program for his beloved alma mater, Davidson College. Now led by Mr. Belk's daughter, MC Belk Pilon, the John M. Belk Endowment continues to partner with innovative, results-oriented programs in North Carolina to further Mr. Belk's values, legacy, and focus on the value of education as a means to personal fulfillment and community vitality. For more information, please visit <http://jmbendowment.org>.

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Further Reading

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Appendix

Table 1.

Tuttle Community College Student Demographic Information

PSEUDONYM	RACE/ ETHNICITY	GENDER	ENROLLMENT STATUS	DEGREE	HIPS EXPERIENCE
Alli	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – General	Writing, service-learning
Betty S	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – Psychology	FYE, service-learning
Camilla	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – Elem Ed	FYE, writing, learning community, service-learning, undergraduate research, team-based, ePortfolio
Emile Blanchet	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – General	FYE, writing, learning community, service-learning, internship, study abroad, undergraduate research, team-based
Esmeralda	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Psychology	FYE, Writing, service-learning , team-based
Hailey	Hispanic	Female	Part-time	AA – General	Service-learning
Hannah	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Mass Communication, Journalism	Service-learning
Hermoine	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Nursing	FYE, learning community, service-learning, team-based
Jasmine	Hispanic/ African American	Female	Full-time	AA – Pre-med	FYE, writing, learning community, service-learning, team-based
Jason	Hispanic	Male	Former student	AA - Philosophy	FYE, service-learning, team-based
John Smith	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AS – General	Service-learning, undergraduate research, team-based

Madison	Hispanic	Non-binary	Full-time	AA – Graphic Arts	FYE, service-learning, team-based
Marcus Wade Johnson	Hispanic	Male	Full-time	Other – Pre-Physical Therapy	FYE, service-learning
Reina Mendez	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – General	FYE, service-learning
Rose	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – General	FYE, service-learning, team-based
Sunny	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – General	FYE, writing, learning community, service-learning, team-based
Valentina Lopez	Hispanic	Female	Part-time	Other	FYE, study abroad, ePortfolio

Note. AA = Associate in Arts degree; AS = Associate in Science degree; ePortfolio = portable, updatable tool that documents accomplishments and experiences; FYE = first year experience, freshman seminar, success course; Internship = experience in the work setting (often with course credit) with supervisor-provided coaching; Learning Community = cohort of students who take two or more linked courses around a common topic; Service-learning = community-based projects that feature a reflective/learning component; Study Abroad = structured learning experiences outside the United States; Team-based = projects in which students work together to solve problems collaboratively; Undergraduate Research = research experiences for students, typically in the sciences; Writing = writing-intensive courses across the curriculum (Kuh, 2017).

Table 2.
Hamlin College Student Demographic Information

PSEUDONYM	RACE/ ETHNICITY	GENDER	ENROLLMENT STATUS	DEGREE	HIPS EXPERIENCE
Abi	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA –General	Service-learning
AeonD	Hispanic	Male	Part-time	AS – Software Development	FYE, service-learning, capstone, team- based
Akira	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – General	Internship, study abroad
Butterfly	Hispanic/White non-Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – General	Service-learning, internship
Crissy	Hispanic/White non-Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AS – Legal Studies	FYE, learning community, service- learning, study abroad
Don Diego de la Vega	Hispanic	Male	Full-time	AA – Engineering	FYE, service-learning, undergraduate research
japa	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Nursing	Service-learning
Kelly Moore	Hispanic	Female	Part-time	AA – Psychology	FYE, service-learning, undergraduate research
Leo	Hispanic	Male	Full-time	Other	Internship, study abroad
Natty O	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – General	Service-learning, study abroad
Octane	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Computer Science	FYE, service-learning, internship, team- based

sky	Hispanic	Non-binary	Part-time	AS – General	Service-learning, undergraduate research
Star	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – General	FYE, writing, service-learning, internship, capstone, team-based
Taher	Hispanic	Female	Full-time	AA – Psychology	FYE, service-learning, internship, capstone, undergraduate research
Valentina Romero	Hispanic	Female	Former student	AA – General	FYE, writing, learning community, service-learning, study abroad, team-based

Note. AA = Associate in Arts degree; AS = Associate in Science degree; Capstone = culminating projects that synthesize and apply learning; FYE = first year experience, freshman seminar, success course; Internship = experience in the work setting (often with course credit) with supervisor-provided coaching; Learning Community = cohort of students who take two or more linked courses around a common topic; Service-learning = community-based projects that feature a reflective/learning component; Study Abroad = structured learning experiences outside the United States; Team-based = projects in which students work together to solve problems collaboratively; Undergraduate Research = research experiences for students, typically in the sciences; Writing = writing-intensive courses across the curriculum (Kuh, 2017).