

Survey of Latinos in Higher Education

Unveiling Barriers, Celebrating Persistence and Identifying Opportunities for Tomorrow

The past few decades have seen a dramatic increase in Latino enrollment in higher education. While the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to [slow this momentum](#), Latinos still comprise one-fifth of all students in U.S. colleges and universities. As this population continues to grow, so does the need for solutions that support their persistence and degree completion.

To gain deeper insight into the higher education experiences of Latino students across the country, UnidosUS commissioned BSP Research to survey 3,000 Latinos, aged 18-35, who are current or recent postsecondary students.

Our survey reveals that Latinos place a high value on postsecondary education but continue to face a maze of barriers that complicate their path to graduation. The vast majority are balancing work and school, and a concerning number lack access to affordable and nutritious food. As a result, they feel overwhelmed, with a large proportion reporting that they have considered dropping out.

UnidosUS remains committed to doubling the number of Latino four-year graduates by the year 2040, recognizing that the postsecondary success of Latinos is inseparable from the nation's future economic and civic prosperity. This survey illuminates the pressing need for policymakers to join the effort by addressing barriers that threaten to derail the ambitions and promise of Latino students.

Key Findings:

1. **Latino students see college education as an aspirational pathway to big life goals:** getting well-paying jobs and providing a better life for their families

Many students seek college degrees to get ahead in life, and Latino students are no exception to this. In asking about their motivations for pursuing higher education, most Latinos cited reasons revolving around an aspirational idea of having a better life in the future. Getting well-paying jobs was cited by half of all respondents as a top reason to attain a college degree;



One in five respondents also citing it as their top reason to pursue higher education.

with one in five respondents also citing it as their top reason to pursue higher education. This response was also higher by a 10-point margin to the other choices, displaying the connection that Latino students make between the two.

Rounding out the top three were providing a better life for their family (40%) and pursuing a more fulfilling career (37%). Latino students are clearly looking toward their future when deciding to pursue higher education. This was consistent across oversample states with the expectation of Florida where “gaining new knowledge and skills” came in at number two (ranked 4th on the national scale).



2. Latinos face various barriers across the collegiate school system, and these barriers occur at rates even higher among lower income students, LGBTQ+ students and single parents

Lack of access to affordable and healthy food: At the most basic level, 85% of Latino college students cannot consistently access affordable and healthy food. This finding is consistent across the national and oversample states. Among all respondents, 50% reported that this happened either “a few times a week” or “daily.” For single parents, this number rose to 63%. High across demographics, lower-income students experience the biggest impact of food insecurity: 54% of respondents with household incomes under \$29,000 and 55% of respondents with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Among these groups, 21% and 20% reported lacking affordable and healthy food daily. It is important to note that while this impacted those at the lowest income levels the hardest, more than 40% of those from higher-income households also face this problem.



85% of students are unable to get affordable and healthy food.

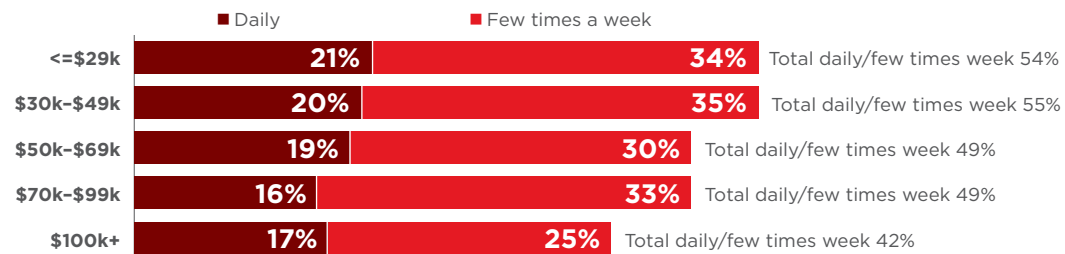
Most Latino college students (85%) have been unable to get affordable and healthy food

During your time in college, how often are/were you unable to get affordable and nutritious food?



Half of Latino college students are unable to get affordable and healthy food on a regular basis

During your time in college, how often are/were you unable to get affordable and nutritious food?



Low information about SNAP resources: Despite the shockingly high amount of Latino college students who report some level of food insecurity while in college, less than half (45%) of them have applied for SNAP benefits. Florida and Arizona report the lowest number of applicants, with 42% and 43% respectively, while California nears the halfway point at 47%. When asked about why they have not applied for SNAP benefits, 45% of Latino college students said that they believe they are not eligible for the program. It should be noted that this includes 44% of those from household incomes less than \$29,000, and 47% of those with household incomes \$30,000 to \$49,000. Also notable is the difference between California and the other states on this option. Only 35% of California respondents cited that they believed they were ineligible for the program, compared to 50% in Florida, 52% in Arizona and 52% in Texas.

A recent GAO [study](#) found that about **59% of food insecure students who were potentially eligible for SNAP** didn't report receiving benefits, underscoring the urgent need to improve outreach and access to food assistance programs for postsecondary students.

Maintaining full- and part-time jobs while in school: The vast majority (80%) of Latino students report having held a full- or part-time job while attending college. While the number is slightly higher (+5) for part-time students, working while pursuing a higher education



80% of Latino students working either full- or part-time while attending college.

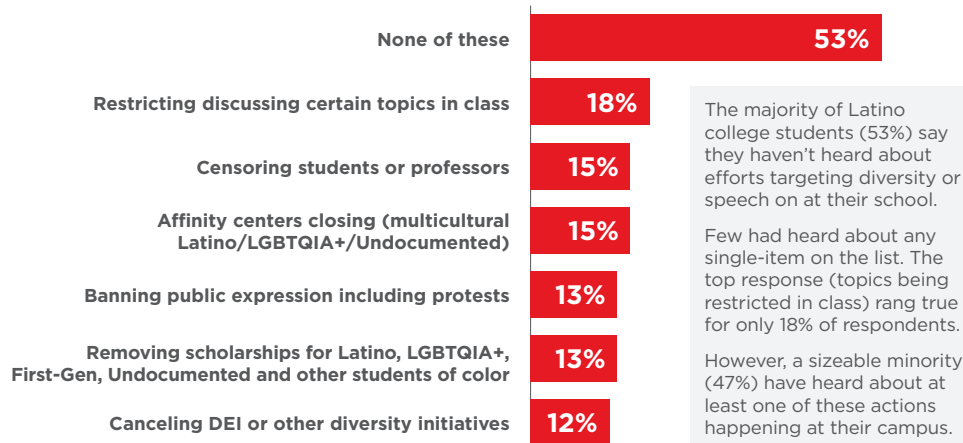
degree is a reality for most Latino college students. Overall, nearly half (49%) say they have held a part-time job at some point during their college studies, while 26% say they have held full-time jobs. This includes 78% of currently enrolled and 80% of recently graduated undergraduate students. The reality of holding a job while studying is consistent regardless of income level or type of school.

Respondents’ concerns about paying for college correspond with the results of our [2024 Latino Banking and Financial Health Survey](#), which found that **over two-thirds of Latinos with student loan debt are facing difficulties in securing necessities like housing, food and healthcare.** This earlier survey found that 48% of Latinos with student loans have \$15,000 or more in outstanding debt, with 53% of Latinos having gone into deferment or forbearance with their loan. Furthermore, **64% of Latino borrowers cited their student debt impacted their mental and physical health.**

Targeting diversity and censoring students on campus: The majority of Latino college students (53%) say that they have not heard about efforts targeting diversity or speech on their own campuses; however, a sizable minority (47%) report having heard of at least one action happening. 18% of students say they have heard of “restricting discussing certain topics in class,” 15% have heard of the “censoring of students or professors” and 15% say they have heard of the closure of affinity centers on campus. The restricting of certain topics in class was notably highest in Texas at 20%. Also notable is the impact on LGBTQ+ students; one in five LGBTQ+ students report having heard of the closure of affinity centers on their campuses.

A little more than half of Latino college students have not heard about efforts targeting diversity or speech at their school

Have you heard about any of the following happening at YOUR college or university? Select all that apply.

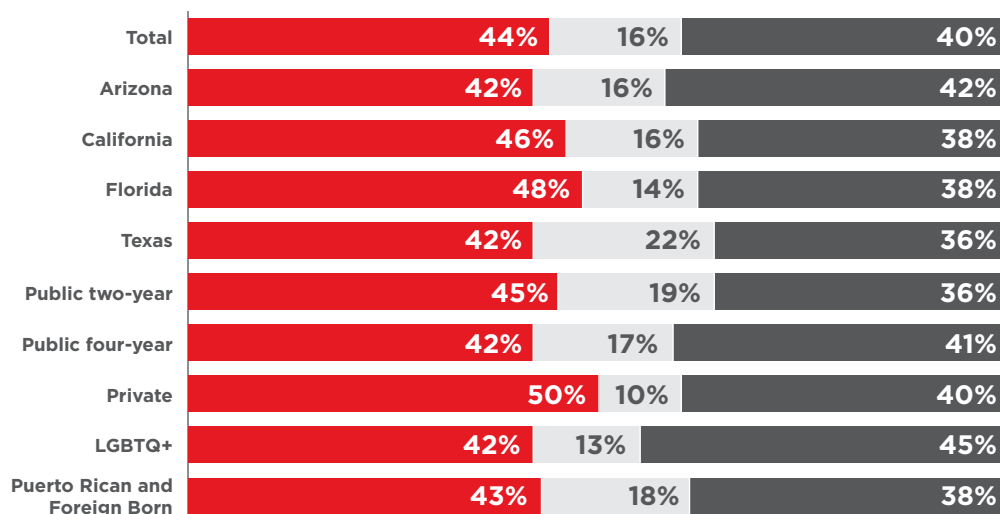


On the whole, Latino students that heard about efforts targeting diversity or speech at their campus were motivated by the experience: 44% said they feel more motivated to finish their degree and engage on issues they care about as a result of the experience. A smaller share (16%) said these events had no impact on their motivation to continue their education. A sizeable minority though (40%) felt disappointed with their school and less motivated to complete their education at that institution.

Efforts targeting diversity and speech motivate some, but discourage others

[Among those who heard about these actions on their campus] What impact have these events had on your motivation to stay at your college/university or continue your education?

- More motivated to be involved in issues I care about and finish my education at my school
- No impact on my motivation to continue my education
- Disappointed with my school, and feel less motivated to finish my education at my school



3. Many Latino college students experienced technical problems trying to file the 2023-2024 FAFSA application

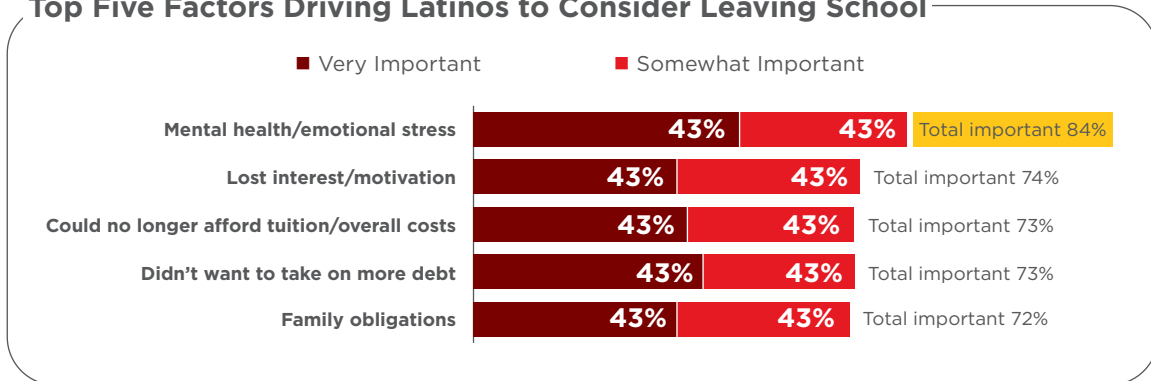
The 2023-2024 FAFSA posed challenges to Latino students looking to apply for aid. Overall, 43% of respondents who filed the 2023-2024 FAFSA report experiencing technical problems with the application. The technical issues encountered with last year’s FAFSA application created significant barriers to accessing financial aid across states, income levels and school types. 43% of college students with incomes under \$29,000 and 41% of students with incomes between \$30,000 to \$49,000 report issues with the application. Notably, 47% of respondents from California students reported experiencing these issues, higher than Arizona, Florida or Texas.

4. Two-thirds of Latino students considered leaving school at some point during their time in college; one-third took a leave at some point

Despite aspirations to attend and graduate from higher education programs, the large number of students who at some point consider taking leaves of absence from school demonstrates the impact of various barriers. Our study found that 66% Latino college students considered leaving school at some point, and that 34% actually did leave. This is similar across the national and state samples. Additionally, over one in ten respondents said that they have taken a leave and still have not returned.

Unfortunately, this finding is high and fairly consistent across demographics. Single parents appear to be impacted the most by this, with 77% having considered leaving and 44% having done it. Low-income students are also highly impacted, with 74% of Latino college students with household incomes under \$29,000 saying they have considered leaving school and 42% going through with it. Regarding the LGBTQ+ community, 71% of students who identify as LGBTQ+ say they have at some point considered taking a leave, with 39% having done so and 15% not yet having returned.

Top Five Factors Driving Latinos to Consider Leaving School



5. Although many Latinos do not want to take more student debt, more than half do so out of necessity to afford college

Recognizing the rising costs of college, over half of the respondents to our survey have taken out a student loan to afford college. 62% of borrowers took out public, federal student loans, which was consistent across states. Importantly, nearly one in three respondents said their parents took out a loan to pay for college, indicating the intergenerational effects of student debt amongst Latinos. This includes over one in four borrowers whose family income was less than \$29,000 and nearly half of those who took out a private loan.



73% of those considering taking a leave of absence or leaving school altogether cited not wanting to take on more debt as an important reason.

Feelings about borrowing were mixed, with 29% of Latino student loan borrowers recognizing that such debt would make things financially tough for a while but would be ultimately worth it. 73% of those considering taking a leave of absence or leaving school altogether cited not wanting to take on more debt as an important reason.

Methodology

BSP was commissioned by UnidosUS to field a study of Latinos ages 18-35 who are current or recent college graduates. The study included oversamples in four states: California, Florida, Texas and Arizona. The survey was conducted between August 16 and September 25, 2024.

All respondents completed the survey online and it was available in English or Spanish, according to respondents' preference. The margin of error for this study was (+/- 1.8%).

Acknowledgments

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About UnidosUS

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of more than 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [X](#).

Media Inquiries

For follow-up questions regarding survey results, email news@unidosus.org.

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