

# Chicanos in Higher Education

## A Summary of:

**“Over the Ivy Walls: Educational Mobility of Low-Income Chicanos”** (1995) State University of New York Press. By Patricia Gándara.

**“Choosing Higher Education: Educationally Ambitious Chicanos and the Path to Social Mobility”** (May 1994) University of California-Davis. By Patricia Gándara.

### Focus

- Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School
- ✓ Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

## Overview

*Choosing Higher Education* focuses on that small percentage of Chicano and Chicana students, coming from backgrounds of poverty and low education, who carved out a place for themselves in higher education. All of the professionals interviewed in the study were considered at risk of dropping out of school, yet all earned an MD, PhD or JD degree conferred from a highly regarded American university of national stature. *Over the Ivy Walls* looks at this same group of successful Chicano students, but adds a new cohort of 20, younger Chicana professionals (who earned degrees in the late 1980s and early 1990s) to analyze changing gender expectations in Chicano communities and the larger American society.

According to researcher Patricia Gándara, high academic achievement among low-income Mexican Americans is tragically an anomaly in our society. While Mexican American students aspire to the same high levels of achievement as their non-Chicano peers, few actually realize these aspirations. Latinos are the least educated, major population group in the United States. They are the least likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college and receive a college degree. For example, in California and Texas in 1994, where more than

## POPULATION

The study focused on high academic achievement found among low-income, Mexican Americans from homes with little formal education. It examined the backgrounds of 50 persons, 30 male and 20 female, born during the 1940s to early 1950s, who met most of the predictors for school failure or “dropping out.” All came from families in which neither parent completed high school or held a job higher than skilled labor. Most were sons and daughters of farm workers and other unskilled laborers. Most began school with Spanish as their primary language, yet all completed a doctoral-level education from the country’s most prestigious institutions. All received their college education during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. Thirteen were immigrants, 21 first-generation and 16 second-generation.

one-third of the college age population was Latinos, only 11-13% were enrolled in four-year colleges. As reported by Gándara, the disproportionately low representation Latinos in four-year colleges and universities throughout the nation is the product of several circumstances: extremely high dropout rates in high school, inadequate preparation for continued study and the failure of four-year institutions to attract many qualified Latino candidates.

## Key Findings

This study selected a group of successful adults and interviewed them to determine what led to their success. In terms of youth outcomes, the key finding is simply that all of the Chicano professionals in the study were considered at risk of

dropping out of school, yet all earned an MD, PhD or JD degree conferred from a highly regarded, American university of national stature. The factors that led to the success of these adults are detailed below under “Contributing Factors.”

## Contributing Factors

### Family Involvement

Whether it took the form of providing educational materials at home or becoming an active decision maker within the child’s school, parental involvement was cited by interviewees as an important component in their educational lives. Many reported they perceived their mother was more supportive than their father. “While fathers frequently indicated they wanted their children to do well in school, they were more ambivalent in the messages they conveyed to their children,” noted the evaluator. In cases where the father was not fully supportive of the child’s educational achievement, usually the mother intervened on the child’s behalf.

### Environment of Achievement

Most interviewees reported the availability of some reading material in the home, and more than half reported that one of their parents was an avid reader despite a low level of formal education. Several of the parents held strong views on social issues, or were well-versed in history or literature and shared this love of inquiry and ideas with their children. When asked about the availability in their homes of an encyclopedia, dictionary, daily newspaper, magazine subscriptions and more than 25 books, 98% of the subjects had at least two of the five

*“When I was in the tenth grade, I took that special stupid test they give you, and it came out that I would have been a fantastic mechanic...so they tracked me average...again...which precluded me from taking college prep classes, and I had already taken geometry and Spanish and biology and some other courses in junior high.”*

—Chicana lawyer

*“This is not a study about ‘successful’ individuals...but about people who chose education as a vehicle for social or economic mobility or personal fulfillment.”*

— Patricia Gándara, evaluator

things and almost 70% had an encyclopedia as they were growing up. Sixty-two percent recounted how discussions of politics and world events were routine topics in their households.

### Resiliency

Some interviewees were dogged by weak test scores or negative impressions that had to be overcome before they were permitted to enter the college preparatory track. Almost all of the study subjects were eventually tracked into college preparatory courses when they were in high school. Once there, the college prep track had an enormous impact on them, not only because they were able to participate in classes that would lead to college, but also because of the new, challenging peer group it defined for them.

### Integrated Education

In almost every case, these students got into classes or schools in which they were the only – or one of few – Chicanos in their academic peer group. In both elementary and high school, 60-70% of the subjects reported that they attended mostly white (and usually middle- to upper middle-class) or mixed schools in which at least half the students were Anglo.

### Financial Aid

All of the interviewees were from low-income families so financial aid became necessary for many to attend college. Through aid provided by Latino

recruitment programs, scholarships for high-achieving scholars or stipends for low-income students, the subjects were able to break the cycle of poverty in their families.

### **Mentoring**

Half the interviewees reported having mentors (defined by the evaluator as “a person who encouraged, showed the way and nurtured the subject’s aspirations to pursue higher education”) outside the family. The mentor relationships were informal, positive relationships with supportive adults from the community. In some cases, mentoring took the form of an exceptional interest in the academic nurturing of a subject, even early on. Thirty percent of the women interviewees cited a person outside of the family as having had a major influence on setting and/or achieving educational goals; 60% of the male subjects cited such a person.

### ***A Focus on Minority Achievement and on Transition***

Fifty-two percent of the interviewees attributed their college and/or graduate school attendance, at least in part, to recruitment programs for Chicanos, which brought both information and financial aid. One-third of the subjects used junior colleges as their entry point into higher education, lacking adequate financial support to go directly to universities.

### ***Hard Work***

By their own accounts, the professionals interviewed in the study were not the “smartest” students, but they were among the hardest workers. Almost two-thirds of them reported having a period in school in which they did not do well. However, hard work at home was in evidence for nearly all the subjects, many of whom held jobs to help financially support the family, cared for younger siblings and took on a large share of household chores.

## **Evaluator Comments**

The evaluator noted that the higher proportion of men in the study was not by design but was dictated by the difficulty of finding female subjects. The evaluator determined that the high level of education achieved by the subject group was much more difficult for Chicanas to achieve without at least one parent breaking into the middle class before them, most typically a mother who had attained the status of a clerical or secretarial position.

Since the group of subjects does not include those completing their education since the early 1980s, the evaluator acknowledged that the study leaves open the question of how representative the experiences of this group were compared to those of more recent graduates.

### **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

To locate the subject group, the evaluator contacted universities and government offices across the country and asked them to nominate individuals. To a smaller extent, the evaluator pulled names from membership lists of professional organizations, class lists and university rosters. After reviewing literature on achievement, motivation and minority schooling, the evaluator interviewed subjects with both closed and open-ended questions, then highlighted areas of broad commonality.

### **EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING**

The evaluation was funded by the University of California-Davis.

### **GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

The evaluator, while pulling subjects from across the nation, chose to keep their hometowns, places of schooling and current location anonymous.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

#### **Research Contacts**

Patricia Gándara  
University of California-Davis  
One Shields Avenue  
Davis, CA 95616  
Phone: 530.752.1011  
[pchgandara@ucdavis.edu](mailto:pchgandara@ucdavis.edu)