Help-Seeking Behaviors Among First-Generation Latinx College Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Dedication

I dedicate this literature review to everyone who supported me through the two years of graduate school. There was a lot of sacrifices to receive a higher education. This paper is for the first-generation college students who did not believe they can obtain a higher education. Special shout out to my partner Carolyn Garcia for creating a positive environment while we were stressed and reminding me why I came to social work in the first place. I would also like to dedicate my paper to Dr. Park as she has mentor me throughout the program.
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Abstract

Help-Seeking Behaviors Among First-Generation Latinx College Students: A Systematic Literature Review

By

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Master of Social Work

Study Purpose: The purpose of this systematic literature review is to examine the relationship between Latinx first-generation college students' (FGCS) mental health challenges (i.e., anxiety, depression, and isolation) and their help-seeking behaviors.

Methods: This systematic literature review utilized peer-reviewed articles that focused on Latinx FGCS and their attitudes in regard to seeking mental health services. Additionally, the articles selected depicted the obstacles Latinx FGCS face including their mental health challenges. We excluded articles that did not include participants that were both Latinx and first-generation college students.

Findings: Latinx FGCS underutilize mental health treatment and are not likely to seek mental health support due to stigma impacting mental health literacy, self-resilience, and health care barriers.

Discussion: These findings suggest a need to advocate for awareness of mental health to break the stigma, provide treatment interventions, and bridge resources to support Latinx FGCS.

Keywords: Latinx, first-generation college student(s), help-seeking behavior(s), anxiety, depression, isolation
Problem Statement, and Research Purpose

Research Problem

As the Hispanic and Latinx population in the United States grows, the same pattern of expansion extends into higher education systems. Over the course of 20 years, Latinx student enrollment increased from 8.8 million to 17.9 million students, and in 2016, 19.1% of all Hispanic and Latinx students enrolled in post-secondary institutions (United States Census Bureau, 2018). The rapid increase in enrollment among Latinx students also accounts for an increase in first-generation college students, a student whose parent(s) did not attend and/or complete a four-year university degree, as many are the first in their family to attend a four-year College. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), Latinx are much more likely to be first-generation college students than other racial/ethnic groups. Almost half of Latinx (44%) were the first in their family to attend college, compared to African Americans (34%), Asian (29%), and White (22%) students. With the increased diversity of student populations, it is more crucial than ever to consider the unique challenges that first-generation Latinx college students may confront. Research has shown that about 51.2% of Latinx youth and 46.0% of Latinx adults suffering from serious mental illnesses do not receive treatment (SAMHSA, 2020). Furthermore, in higher education, first-generation college students (FGCS) are considered a disadvantaged group. Because of inadequate financial resources or severe financial debt, poorer academic readiness, and concerns about belonging on campus, these students, whose parents do not have four-year college degrees face significant challenges (Chang, 2020). The national college dropout rate is 44% and among those, 33% are FGCS (EAB, 2019). First-generation Latinx students continue to struggle in higher academia and with their mental health.
Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study's systematic literature review is to examine the relationship between mental health challenges and their help-seeking behaviors Latinx FGCS. It is hoped that by researching this topic, there will be clearer indicators as to why populations like Latinx FGCS are less likely to seek and utilize mental health services in hopes of addressing the issue to receive higher turnaround rates for said services. Additionally, this paper aims to identify factors that contribute to the unique mental health struggles that Latinx FGCS struggle with. Through this paper, we hope to acquire answers to the following questions. What are the mental health-seeking behaviors among Latinx FGCS? What is the relationship between this population’s mental health state and their identity as Latinx FGCS? What factors contribute to the low rates of seeking mental health services?

Significance of the Study

This research will provide important information in hopes of curating effective mental health treatment within this population which may provide insight into how to create interventions to increase college success rates and improve their well-being. Through this systematic literature review, we will solely focus on anxiety, depression, and isolation. We will also identify common themes that exist in the literature that contribute to poor mental health-seeking behaviors such as cultural stigmas, self-resilience, and healthcare disparities.
Help-seeking Behavior Among Latinx FGCS

Help-seeking behavior can be defined as the process of reaching out and obtaining help for mental health challenges through a sequence of steps that start with an individual experiencing symptoms, followed by attributing those symptoms to a mental disorder, weighing their alternatives for care, and finally deciding whether to seek help (Bauer et al., 2012). If an individual has a higher perception of need, they are more likely to seek help. Seeking out support for mental health challenges is especially important among Latinx FGCS because they are susceptible to the stressors of not only being a minority within a majority society in higher academia but also experiencing additional barriers for being the first in their family to pursue higher education compared to their counterparts (Mayorga et al., 2018). These obstacles have a significant impact on the mental health of Latinx FGCS, increasing their symptoms of depression and anxiety while decreasing their ability to manage these symptoms (Mayorga et al., 2018; Tello & Lonn, 2017). Therefore, this signifies the importance of examining Latinx FGCS’s help-seeking behaviors regarding mental health support.

The Impact of Stigma on Mental Health Literacy among Latinx Students

The stigma around mental health has made it difficult for Latinx to acknowledge that they are in need of mental health support (DeFreitas et al., 2018; Mendoza et al., 2015;). Studies regarding evidence-based treatment and prevalent Latinx cultural beliefs show that a Latinx person exhibiting symptoms of a mental health disease may feel that getting therapy for such issues could humiliate or shame the family (Cheng, 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). Stigma based on cultural and societal perceived beliefs holds the ability to alter help-seeking behavior within this population, such as who is deemed “crazy” or “unstable” enough to seek professional health.
Therefore, mental health stigma is a negative predictor of help-seeking attitudes among Latinx students (Mendoza et al., 2015).

There is also the component of how this stigma can lead to misinformation regarding what is viewed as a mental health disorder, causing this population to not properly recognize symptoms of mental health challenges or know when to seek help. According to Cheng et al. (2018), Latinx FGCS are unable to identify with symptomology because of misinformation about certain mental health conditions (i.e., generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder) and stigma affecting mental health literacy. Additionally, not being aware of the symptomatology associated with disorders like anxiety and depression affects how this population views their need to seek help. Therefore, attitudes regarding seeking professional help were negatively influenced by the lack of mental health literacy. Low mental health literacy among Latinx FGCS is problematic since knowledge can address any mental health challenges and steer an individual into getting professional help. This finding suggests that Latinx FGCS may be prevented from accessing services due to a lack of knowledge about mental health (Benuto et al., 2019). Additionally, accompanied by limited knowledge or misinformation, lack of physical symptoms prevents a person from recognizing they have a mental health issue, which may explain why Latinx FGCS and other racial and ethnic minorities have lower rates of perceived need and service usage (Bauer et al., 2012).

**Self-resilience**

First-generation students who are of ethnic minority emphasize the importance of self-reliance, where participants would rather struggle through resolving a problem on their own before imposing on anyone else, whereas White participants stressed personal growth, self-expression, and happiness (Chang, 2020). Furthermore, Latinx FGCS specifically are
accustomed to prioritizing the needs of their families and friends over their own (Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022). In addition, ethnic minority FGCS, including Latinx, describe using self-reliance as their first and main method of problem-solving, however, some also mention using avoidance, a wait-and-see attitude, and distraction to deal with stressors (Chang et al., 2020).

Additional research also suggests that students who identify with the Latinx culture often place their needs aside for the betterment of the entire family (Negrete & Hurd, 2021). This is the hallmark of a collectivist culture and may hinder a student’s ability and willingness to reach out for help (Robinson-Wood, 2017). Therefore, being self-reliant, which entails solving one’s problems without relying on others while being self-sufficient and resilient, pushes this population away from seeking out help, where they are left to fend for themselves.

**Healthcare Barriers**

Healthcare disparities in the US have a disproportionately negative impact on Latinx populations and are strongly influenced by socioeconomic, educational, and cultural factors (Jackson & Garcia, 2014). Younger Latinx FGCS report having no health insurance, and therefore could not access mental health services (Chang et al., 2020). Latinx are twice more likely to be uninsured than non-Latinx whites, continuing to have a higher uninsured rate (ASPE, 2021). However, national rates specifically for Latinx FGCS are unidentified. Whether an individual has health insurance affects help-seeking behaviors for accessing mental health services, lessening their response to seeking professional help due to high costs. Additionally, Latinx FGCS, like other minority groups, are more likely to have under-recognition of mental health conditions, which is problematic because healthcare providers are less likely to discuss these conditions among this population (Bauer, 2012). In a study, researchers found that white
students suffering from depression were more likely than ethnic minority students experiencing depression to obtain an earlier diagnosis or treatment (Thomas et al., 2011). This demonstrates another unique barrier that Latinx FGCS face regarding their mental health. Going undiagnosed as well as having unequal access to healthcare leads to fewer diagnoses which then results in underutilization of treatment services among Latinx FGCS.

**Mental Health Struggles**

The lack of help-seeking behaviors increases the severity of psychological distress such as depression and anxiety. When avoiding treatment many students can start developing risky behaviors such as isolation and not wanting to attend classes which can result in college completion rates. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), FGCS students at large institutions reported less social support from friends and family and had lower life satisfaction than continuing-generation college students. FGCS frequently experiences navigating higher academia while balancing life experiences. (e.g., FGCS were more likely to live off-campus, work full-time, and raise children as single parents).

**Anxiety**

Anxiety is described as excessive concern and anxious anticipation about a variety of occasions or activities, such as work or school performance, that occur more days than not for at least six months (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Seeking higher education is a new path many Latinx students decide to take from their families. Cultural traditions are still pushed onto many of these individuals that may affect a college student's mental health. Gender roles impact Latin individuals significantly. For a woman, they have added pressure of pursuing a family and understanding the importance of motherhood and self-sacrificing their goals and aspirations (marianismo). Parents often express
wanting grandchildren in the family. As for men they are expected to be breadwinners and oftentimes lean towards labor jobs. Education is not seen as important and should be able to support the family (Corona et al. 2016). Untraditional routes like achieving higher education and still trying to please the family can be overwhelming. Adding pressure to please the family can cause high stress. Studies have shown 40% of Latinx FGCS experience mild to extremely severe anxiety. (Fernandez et al., 2022). Consistent pressure on the family’s expectations adds more anxiety to the student and may result in negative experiences in higher academia and ultimately resulting in lower enrollment and college completion.

**Depression**

Sadness and/or a loss of interest in previous hobbies are symptoms of depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It can impair your ability to perform at work and home and cause several mental and physical issues. First-generation Latinx college students risk experiencing depression under the circumstances of academic and financial responsibilities and lack of support from family members (Suwinyattichaiporn, 2022). These students come from low socioeconomic status which requires many to support their families while maintaining the added pressure of being successful in higher academic spaces.

In addition to responsibilities at times, students need a supportive environment at home (Suwinyattichaiporn, 2022). As first-generation college students, higher academia is an unfamiliar space for many of those students. When navigating new communities, they are blind to the resources and support that the university provides and offers. Families do not understand the added pressures of being in higher education. During this adjustment period, it is important for first-generation college students to integrate into the college environment. Finding community by joining clubs and connecting with other students has been found to be beneficial.
It is important for students to find their support systems, a sense of belonging which can provide the student with a stronger sense of belonging to the University and a greater likelihood of success (Stebleton et al., 2014).

First-generation college students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds confront additional challenges in their pursuit of academic achievements, such as discrimination, marginalization, and hardship because of their social class identities. Due to instructors' and peers' misinterpretations and stereotypes based on their socioeconomic circumstances, some FGCS express feeling invalidated and embarrassed. (Schuyler et al., 2021). When students are not receiving support from home or school it makes it harder for them to want to continue. Being in a classroom with students and a professor to who you cannot relate can make school more challenging. According to Pössel et al. (2017), over 20% of college students report experiencing depression. More imperative to the current study is the idea that at-risk students are also more likely to experience higher levels of stress and depression. Latinx FGCS are at high risk of developing depression. Therefore, it is important for Latinx FGCS to be aware of mental health services and be willing to seek help while in college.

**Isolation**

A person's lack of healthy social connections is a psychological condition known as loneliness. Despite the fact that loneliness is not a component of mental health in and of itself, a large body of research suggests that loneliness is a significant predictor of mental health issues including distress (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). As the world experienced the pandemic of Covid-19, there was an increasing amount of isolation to protect lives and decrease the spread of the virus. Isolating has negatively impacted many individuals including FGCS. Students and educational institutions around the world are under unprecedented stress as a result of the Covid-
19 pandemic. Challenges of remote education and social isolation contributed to the rise in both depressive and anxiety symptoms (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). Thus, studying this population’s mental health struggles and their help-seeking attitudes is important to open dialogue on the importance of making mental health treatment readily available and acquirable as well as destigmatizing mental health disorders to ensure that individuals suffering from a condition receive the help they rightfully deserve. In comparison to other communities, the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on Latinx communities. Undocumented students and their families were not eligible for CARES Act relief, which increased their financial vulnerabilities and made it more challenging to manage the pandemic's economic effects. This is despite the fact that they already had insecure living and working conditions and limited access to resources (Montiel et al., 2022). This shows how the Latinx community was negatively impacted and continues to struggle in higher education with another barrier such as COVID-19.
Methods

Inclusion Criteria

We included peer-reviewed articles that focused on the mental health help-seeking behaviors among Latinx FGCS. These articles included participants who identified as Latinx, Latino, Latina, or Hispanic. Furthermore, we included both native and foreign-born Latinx sources. All participants identified as first-generation college students. This systematic literature review also included Latinx FGCS who experienced mental health barriers that included depression, anxiety, and isolation.

Exclusion Criteria

Because this systematic literature review is exclusive to Latinx FGCS, we excluded continuing-generation college students. We also excluded ethnic and racial identities that were not Hispanic or Latinx as well as excluded other mental health struggles that were not isolation, depression, or anxiety.

Data Sources and Keywords

The following databases were used to obtain data for this paper: ProQuest, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. In order to retrieve accurate and relevant information for this paper, we have gathered data from existing literature that includes participants that identify as Latinx, of, relating to, or marked by Latin American heritage, used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latina or Latino (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), first-generation college students, students whose parents or primary caregivers have not earned 4-year college degrees (Chang, 2020), and mental health struggles, defined as a broad range of medical conditions that cause emotional and psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, and isolation (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
Findings

Study Characteristics

Of the studies reviewed, twenty-nine met the criteria for this literature review. All of the studies took place in the United States and included participants that identified as Latinx or Hispanic FGCS. Five out of twenty-nine articles were literature reviews and twenty-four out of twenty-nine were research studies. Four of the primary sources included census data to identify statistics about Latinx FGCS such as enrollment in higher education, health insurance, and dropout rates. Most of the studies utilized quantitative studies through online surveys to gather data about the mental health experiences of Latinx FGCS. Seventeen out of twenty-nine discussed themes surrounding Latinx FGCS’s mental health help-seeking behaviors. Fourteen out of twenty-nine discussed the mental health challenges experienced by Latinx FGCS.

What are the mental health-seeking behaviors among Latinx FGCS?

From the articles that focused on help-seeking behaviors, seven of the seventeen articles discussed how stigma among the Latinx culture negatively affected the perceived need for services among Latinx FGCS. Furthermore, three out of seventeen peer-reviewed articles examined mental health literacy and its impact on the perceived need for mental health services among Latinx FGCS. These findings demonstrate the misinformation among this population, resulting in not being able to recognize the symptomatology of certain mental health challenges (Bauer, 2012; Benuto et al., 2019; Cheng, 2020).

Five out of seventeen mentioned self-resilience as a factor that prevented Latinx FGCS from seeking professional help due to being the first in their family to attend college and not wanting to impose their struggles onto their family. Two of these self-reliant articles explained how self-resiliency stemmed from not wanting to dishonor the family’s reputation by being
labeled with a mental health diagnosis (Mendoza et al., 2015; Suwinyattichaiporn & Johnson, 2022). Therefore, stopping them from seeking mental health support. Lastly, five out of seventeen articles argued the impact of healthcare disparities (i.e. being uninsured) within the Latinx FGCS, preventing them from accessing mental health services. One article further explained how uninsured Latinx FGCS were significantly less likely to seek mental health care because of out-of-pocket costs (Chang et al., 2020).

What is the relationship between this population’s mental health state and their identity as Latinx FGCS?

From the articles that focused on mental health struggles, four out of fourteen articles discussed having anxiety as a Latinx FGCS in higher academia. An article shared that traditional cultural gender roles provide pressure on a student to meet family expectations (Corona et al., 2016). Oftentimes, education is not a high priority in Latinx families due to other responsibilities taking priority, such as providing for the family and meeting their expectations. Additionally, three of the four articles further discussed how financial responsibilities cause anxiety for Latinx FGCS, especially those that come from low socioeconomic households (Fernandez et al., 2022; Suwinyattichaiporn, 2022; Schuyler et al., 2021)

Furthermore, four out of fourteen peer-reviewed articles analyzed how Latinx FGCS commonly deal with depression. These findings suggest that Latinx FGCS exhibit depressive symptoms due to challenges in navigating universities and not being aware of the resources within their universities. Additionally, Latinx FGCS experience symptoms of depression when they are disconnected from their campus (i.e., not having mentorship or feelings of social integration) and do not have a support system within the school community from students and
professors (Possel et al., 2017; Schuyler et al., 2021; Stebleton et al., 2021; Suwinyattichaiporn, 2022).

Lastly, three out of fourteen articles explored social isolation and how it negatively impacted Latinx FGCS. Two articles discussed the importance of social connection with other students with similar interests. This was further examined in one article that analyzed the impacts of COVID-19 on education and socialization (Montiel et al., 2022; Suwinyattichaiporn, 2022). Remote learning increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation for many students due to the changes in their learning environment and COVID restrictions. This article further discussed the unique challenges experienced by Latinx FGCS that affected their mental health during the pandemic, such as undocumented Latinx FGCS not having access to additional resources like CARES Act, and creating an even greater distance in higher academia (Montiel et al., 2022).

**What factors contribute to the low rates of seeking mental health services?**

Out of the seventeen peer-reviewed articles that focused on help-seeking behaviors among Latinx FGCS, all articles discussed how Latinx FGCS are susceptible to not seeking mental health support from service providers because of multiple cultural barriers. Thus, stigma, mental health literacy, self-resilience, and healthcare disparities were discussed as factors that contributed to Latinx FGCS’s poor help-seeking behaviors. This is largely due to the negative stigma associated with mental health disorders within the Latinx culture and the lack of discussion among families that prevents Latinx FGCS from identifying their symptoms and seeking support.

**Latinx FGCS and why should they seek mental help?**

Examining the mental health challenges and help-seeking behaviors among Latinx FGCS is especially important due to the increase in enrollment (Stebleton et al., 2014). Because Latinx
FGCS are less susceptible to seeking mental health support, those that experience symptoms of depression and anxiety do not receive support, making daily tasks more challenging to complete (Jenkins et al., 2013). On top of experiencing these symptoms, one article discussed how being a student can create barriers to attending class, completing assignments, and scoring high on an exam. Furthermore, three articles explored how experiencing negative setbacks as a Latinx FCGS can negatively hinder their view on education, and ultimately cause Latinx FGCS to contemplate dropping out. In conclusion, having a positive mental health status as a result of seeking mental health support can lead to better academic achievement, retention, and overall quality of life (Jenkins et al., 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014).
Discussion

Worsening mental health among Latinx FGCS, as well as their reluctance to seek out mental health care, is an increasing concern. The findings of this systematic review reveal how mental health and mental struggles are often stigmatized topics that result in the underutilization of mental health services. This includes the impact of stigma on mental health literacy, where stigma results in misunderstanding what constitutes a mental health challenge, affecting this population to not detect symptoms of mental health disorders or recognize the need to seek support. Additionally, the findings suggest that self-resilience is a common cultural value that places a strong emphasis on personal strength in the face of adversity, and lastly health care barriers due to Latinx FGCS having inadequate coverage as well as being more likely to go undiagnosed.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that Latinx FGCS experience more mental health challenges than their counterparts despite the low mental health help-seeking behaviors reported in the results. This includes anxiety due to gender roles and academic pressure for being the first in their family to pursue higher education, depression due to adjusting to college life, balancing academic responsibilities with family obligations, and navigating a new culture and social environment, and isolation due to cultural differences and barriers that make it difficult for Latinx FGCS to interact with peers, build social networks, and develop a sense of belonging within the school community, especially due to the transition to remote learning from COVID-19. As the findings suggest, Latinx FGCS faces unique institutional and systemic barriers that may impede access to mental health services, resulting in reduced help-seeking behaviors. Therefore, social workers play an important role in addressing these barriers depicted in the findings. In order for social workers to dismantle these structural barriers, they can provide
access to mental health resources, cultivate supportive campus environments for minority FGCS, and promote mental health awareness and destigmatization to reduce stress and increase the likelihood of success for Latinx FGCS.

Overall, the findings within the literature review were congruent with the other studies. Both studies address the low rates of mental health help-seeking behaviors within Latinx FGCS and demonstrate the unique challenges they face that lead them to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Finally, all findings suggest that stigma surrounding mental health in the Latinx culture negatively impacts the perceived need for support.

Implications

As social workers, it is essential to provide effective support to Latinx FGCS. Many of these students face unique challenges such as stigma within the culture, self-resilience, and health care barriers. An important role for social workers is to advocate for students in universities by helping students, professors, and families recognize the challenges of mental health struggles. This can begin with social workers starting the hard conversations of mental health and providing education on this topic. Education can promote awareness and break down the stigma surrounding mental health struggles. Creating workshops and inviting professors, students, and parents/caregivers to take part in the learning process to destigmatize mental health challenges. Within education, students and parents will learn the signs and symptoms when experiencing mental health problems. Having these conversations can begin to validate and normalize feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation that can lead Latinx FGCS to seek help. As they become more aware and learn about mental health, the better equipped they can be in knowing when to receive treatment.
Furthermore, social workers are therapists in diverse settings such as universities and colleges. They can focus on supporting individual students by providing treatment interventions and supporting the student with coping strategies. Support groups are another effective way to help students by allowing them to share their experiences with each other while providing an inclusive space. As a result, they can gain a new sense of belonging and validation as they share common barriers navigating higher education. Finally, social workers can develop research fairs in higher academia where they can provide resources to Latinx FGCS who face financial barriers or lack of healthcare in order to connect students with mental health professionals at a low to no cost rate. By doing so, Latinx FGCS can learn and get connected to services they might have otherwise missed or were unaware of.
Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations that exist within our findings. One limitation is the insufficient sample size of Latinx FGCS due to various factors such as cultural barriers and access to healthcare, which prevent individuals from seeking treatment and agreeing to be a part of a research study. An approach to increase participation would be to have a researcher with a similar identity and provide more anonymous quantitative studies to increase participation. Secondly, though there is an abundance of literature that exists on FGCS, it was difficult getting specific sources that solely focused on Latinx FGCS. Much of the literature grouped them with other ethnic and racial minorities. An approach to gathering more information on Latinx FGCS specifically, more research should be focused on their experience in higher academia, acquire more information about their mental health symptoms, and further research themes on their mental health-seeking behavior to provide more in-depth data. Therefore, addressing these limitations can hopefully inform future research on Latinx FGCS and their help-seeking behaviors.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic literature review aimed to examine the relationship between mental health challenges and help-seeking behaviors among first-generation Latinx college students. The review identified several unique mental health challenges faced by this population, including anxiety, depression, and isolation. The study found that these challenges, combined with cultural barriers such as stigma surrounding mental health, self-resilience, and health care barriers can prevent first-generation Latinx college students from seeking help. Our findings provide insight on the attitudes and behaviors of Latinx FGCS regarding seeking mental health treatment in hopes to shape future interventions and services to make mental health treatment more accessible, attainable, and desirable for Latinx FGCS.
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