

# Latine Transfer Student Experiences: Navigating Culture, College, and Connections

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## Transfer Project Background

Since 2021, the Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has sought to examine community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC) using a multi-method approach including large scale qualitative interview data and quantitative data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Through a series of briefs using data from multiple institutions across the state, we have shared findings on student navigation through the complex transfer ecosystem, experiences during the college transition process, and predictors of successful university transfer. See our prior reports: <https://sites.google.com/uncc.edu/uncctransferresearchproject/home>.

While the experiences and outcomes of our current participants paint an important picture about transfer in NC and yield recommendations for policy and practice, not all subgroups of students experience transfer in the same way. The current phase of our project is to tell the stories of students within important vertical transfer student subgroups to explore the nuanced experiences of specific populations seeking to transition to a university. This report describes the vertical transfer experiences of Latine<sup>1</sup> students within the scope of the UNC Charlotte Transfer Research Project.

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<sup>1</sup> Latine is a gender-neutral term developed as an alternative to the terms Latino, Latina, or Latinx used to identify people of Latin American descent.

# Literature and North Carolina Context

North Carolina, along with other southern states (i.e., Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, etc.), is considered the *Nuevo South*, a collective reference used to describe the rapid increase of the Latine population in the region<sup>i</sup>. NC is home to 1.1 million Latine people comprising 11% of the total population and Latine students account for 16% of the population in K-12 and 18% in higher education<sup>ii</sup>. While the distinct racialized experiences of Latine people have led to persistent educational inequalities at all levels, Latine student enrollment in higher education continues to grow. Despite limited social capital, Latine students leverage alternate forms of capital such as navigational, familial, aspirational, social, and resistant capital to navigate higher education<sup>iii</sup>. The role of families has been documented in prior research, finding Latine parents limited financial and academic support for higher education, yet highlighting the strong *moral support* and *consejos* (advice rooted in cultural values) that guide student persistence<sup>iv</sup>.

In NC, Latine student enrollment in higher education has grown consistently. In 2023-2024, three NC institutions met the legislative definition of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) based on enrollment threshold of 25%, specifically James Sprunt Community College (29.9%), Montgomery Community College (26.3%), and Sampson Community College (31.7%)<sup>v</sup>. Additionally, 21 NC institutions, including 18 CCs and 3 baccalaureate granting institutions (BGI) were considered an Emerging HSI (eHSI) a designation that indicates a growing Latine student enrollment<sup>vi</sup>. The growth of NC Latine student enrollment is most prevalent in CCs where Latine students represent 16% of overall student enrollment<sup>vii</sup>. Like most students who begin at the CC, many Latine students intend to transfer to a BGI to complete a bachelor's degree<sup>viii</sup>. In fall 2024, Latine students accounted for nearly 15% of all students entering a UNC System institution through the vertical transfer pathway, emphasizing the critical role of transfer in Latine students' baccalaureate outcomes<sup>ix</sup>.

## Current Study and Participants

The study presented in this report combines data from two sources to describe the identities and experiences of transfer-intending Latine college students in NC.

- The qualitative data are from a statewide longitudinal research study designed to understand NC transfer students' pre- and post-transfer experiences. In this report, we focus on a subsample (n=16) of Latine students attending a North Carolina Community College (NCCC) or a BGI. This report features data from two years of interviews with Latine participants. Most participants (12) were 18-24 years of age, first-generation college students (15), and first- or second-generation immigrant-origin students (14) with places of origin including El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.
- The quantitative data were derived from a dataset encompassing three administrations (2017-2019) of the Community College Student Survey of Engagement (CCSSE) to over 11,000 students across 24 NCCCs. For this report, we used two criteria to identify the analytic sample (n=860): those who responded affirmatively to Hispanic/Latino as a racial/ethnic identification and who also indicated transfer as a goal for attending community college.
- While the intent of our quantitative analysis was not comparative, we did examine responses of Latine students to the overall transfer-intending sample (n=5,962) to note any important differences. Latine students were slightly less likely (within 3-4%) to have done an internship and to view transfer advising as important. They were slightly more likely (within 3-4%) to have developed an academic plan in the first year, to view career counseling as important, and to report strong support from family to attend college. A much higher proportion of Latine students reported seeking career counseling (46% vs 37%).

# Findings

## Finding 1: Characteristics of Latine students in the Vertical Transfer Process

Predominant intersecting identities among the Latine transfer intending students in the quantitative sample include being of traditional college age (under 25; 88.4%), first-generation college student (60.7%), not speaking English as a first language (56.5%), and caring for dependents (50%). Over 40% of participants worked over 20 hours a week (44.3%) and were attending a high transfer<sup>2</sup> CC (42.24%). Several characteristics were more commonly reported among women, including neotraditional age, first-generation college student, care for dependents, and started college elsewhere. The only characteristic that was more commonly reported among men than women was English as first language. Identifying with another race/ethnicity, working more than 20 hours per week, and attending a high-transfer CC were reported among very similar proportions (within .03%) of women and men.

Characteristic	NC CCSSE Sample			NC Transfer Interview Sample		
	All <sup>3</sup> (n=860)	Women (n=489)	Men (n=359)	All (n=16)	Women (n=7)	Men (n=9)
Neotraditional age (25+)	100 (11.63%)	69 (14.11%)	29 (8.08%)	5 (31.25%)	1 (14.28%)	4 (44.44%)
Identify as two or more races (including Latine)	167 (19.42%)	90 (18.40%)	73 (20.33%)	1 (6.25%)	1 (14.28%)	0 (0%)
First-generation college student	522 (60.70%)	311 (63.60%)	207 (57.66%)	15 (93.75%)	7 (100%)	8 (88.88%)
Care for dependents	430 (50.01%)	270 (55.21%)	157 (43.73%)	3 (18.75%)	2 (28.57%)	1 (11.11%)
Work more than 20 hours/week	381 (44.30%)	215 (43.97%)	163 (45.40%)	2 (12.50%)	1 (14.28%)	1 (11.11%)
Started college elsewhere	149 (17.33%)	98 (20.04%)	49 (13.65%)	3 (18.75%)	1 (14.28%)	2 (22.22%)
Attended high transfer CC	365 (42.44%)	202 (41.31%)	159 (44.29%)	4 (25.00%)	1 (14.28%)	3 (33.33%)

## Finding 2: Language and Cultural Identities as a Driver of Experiences

The interviews revealed nuances in Latine intersecting identities that may help to better understand the characteristics that inform the vertical transfer process. For example, while Latine participants were mostly not primary caretakers for dependents such as their own children, they often played an auxiliary role in caring for younger siblings and extended family. Alfredo, a 20-year-old, pre-transfer student shared that his out-of-school responsibilities included working at a local factory and helping his sister out “a lot” by picking up her children from a school 15 minutes from home. In another case, Rolando, a 19-year-old pre-transfer man shared about his responsibility for serving as a language interpreter for his parents on top of part-time employment:

*Well, I pretty much help them whenever I go to an appointment. They don't understand English. I'm the interpreter in case if they need a backup, as well as anything for my sister's school, I'm there to help them, as well as anything my parents need outside of the house they need help with.*

<sup>2</sup> High transfer institutions award associates degrees but no bachelor's degrees with fewer than 30% of awards (degrees and certificates) in career & technical programs.

<sup>3</sup> The overall NC CCSSE sample includes 12 Latine individuals who identified with a gender “other” than man or woman or preferred not to respond.

Most participants in the qualitative sample were native Spanish speakers who expressed pride in their bilingual abilities and cultural heritage, yet they also reflected on the challenges of navigating monolingual (English-dominant) educational settings.

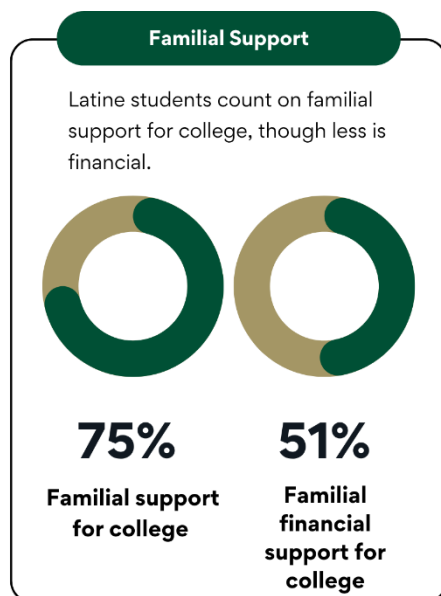
*...my first language was Spanish, but going to school for seven, eight hours a day elementary school, keeping that amount of time in middle school and then on high school...speaking a whole different language English for so long. I feel like it's definitely not helped my Spanish. I'm still fluent or whatever, but one thing is I forgot how to roll my Rs. How did I do that? I don't know, but I feel like growing up in a Mexican household, I wouldn't have preferred any other way to grow up.*

Additionally, Latina participants sought to challenge traditional gender roles that prioritize marriage and motherhood, which could affect career and educational aspirations:

*Well, yeah, it's important that I am a woman and a Latinx woman that continued trying to strive for a better life basically to better myself and that would help end up like helping my family as well. Yeah, I feel like it's important to me that I am Latina and a woman who is trying to strive for a career and not just be... Which is nothing wrong with being a stay-at-home mom but trying to be more than just a woman that is just there to serve her husband or just be a stay-at-home mom, basically.*

### Finding 3: Honoring Familial Sacrifice and Cultural Values

The central role of families in Latine students' educational journeys was evident in the quantitative survey responses, with 75% of respondents reporting that their families were extremely supportive of their



college enrollment. Yet, this support was not often financial as more than half (51%) of students reported that their families did not provide financial assistance for college.

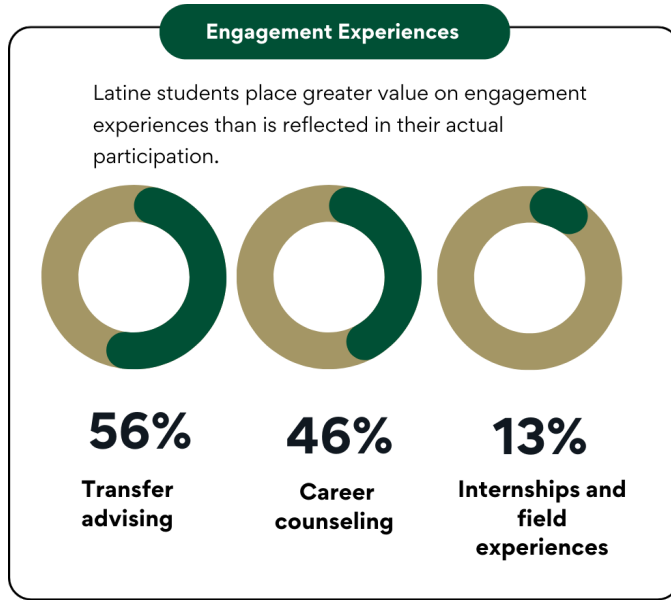
In the qualitative interviews, we found that familial support was demonstrated through encouragement, advice, and expectations that students succeed, with success strongly tied to educational achievement. For example, Sergio explained how both of his parents sat down with him during a difficult period to talk through his challenges and encourage him to persist: *"They always try to motivate me into doing better. To not just get discouraged or believe I can't do something."* For students like Sergio, family support sustained him through academic challenges that would result in stopping out. Others, like Kevin, highlighted the specific ways parents offered guidance and moral support without being able to provide academic help: *"They won't help me that much in my homework because they don't understand English that much, but I guess more like moral support and just like pressure like, 'Don't give up, you got this.'"*

Several students emphasized how family encouragement was tied to sacrifice, obligation, and cultural values. Octavio, a first-generation Mexican American student, reflected: *"I feel that being first generation Mexican American in a way makes me feel obligated to try to be successful, because my parents have sacrificed so much to give me the opportunities that I have. It's really something you can never repay."* Support from family carried both motivational and moral weight, creating an often-unspoken expectation for students to complete their collegiate journeys.

*... my parents didn't have the opportunity to go to college, so it's always been very important for me to be the one to do that. Like I said, I'm the oldest in my family, so I'm also the first one out of my siblings to go, so I'm creating a path that they can ask me questions or see that I'm doing it so they can do it as well. Let's see, I think being Hispanic, my family are immigrants. So, knowing that they came here and that everything that they've done is worth something, because I'm able to get ahead in a way that they couldn't...*

A smaller group of students did report receiving direct financial assistance. For instance, Emmanuel described: *"They pretty much paid for my tuition while I was at [community college], and they pretty much helped me pay for my housing during my second semester at [public BGI] and my textbooks as well."* While these examples were less common, they demonstrate the range of contributions that families make in support of Latine students.

## Finding 4: Transfer Advising and Career Counseling



Survey responses demonstrate Latine student perception of the importance of transfer advising and career planning but also indicate that many Latine students are not connecting to transfer advisors, career counselors, nor internship or clinical experiences. For instance, while 62% of students reported transfer advising as very important, nearly 44% had never sought transfer advising.

Similarly, more than half of Latine students (57%) reported that career counseling was very important, yet 54% had never sought career counseling. Although most Latine students agreed on the high value of internships and field experiences, 87% had not participated in one of these experiences. Instead, data from the qualitative interviews suggests that students relied on family and friends for career advice and self-navigated the transfer process,

leading to some misinformation and delays in their college and career goals. While self-navigating was not uncommon for students overall in the larger study, for Latine students, the added layer of cultural isolation played a role in their advising and career-preparatory experiences.

Jaime, a 19-year-old post-transfer student attending a private institution shared that he was the only Latino in the science department and struggled to make connections with faculty, advisors, and peers:

*I would say that when I did get here my first semester, I had never heard from anything from my advisor, I was just put any classes, and it was weird. I had mentioned that to my [high school] counselor and she said that it may be something that they just do since it was my first semester there. But I don't know, I had no input on which classes that I wanted to take and such more. So that was the weird part for the advising.*

Latine students also expressed feeling “a little lost” without mentors or role models in their chosen fields. The absence of career mentorship impacted their ability to secure internships and entry-level job opportunities. Mario, a student pursuing a computer science degree, told us:

*From where I come from, there's not a lot of Latinos in tech, so I can't really ask anybody for help, to be like, "Hey, how do you do, to get to where you are?" Or anything like that. So it's been a journey on my own, I guess to learn all these new things, but I haven't complained. I mean, it probably slows me down in terms of looking for jobs and how to better prepare myself for jobs, but it's character development, I guess.*

## Implications and Considerations

Latine transfer-intending students hold diverse intersecting identities shaped by age, language, nationality, familial roles, and gender. Students expressed pride in their cultural heritage while navigating English-dominant systems, and reimagined cultural expectations through salient identities, beyond race and ethnicity, exemplifying the heterogeneity of Latine students.

This study also underscores the dual importance of family support and institutional guidance in shaping Latine transfer students' college and career trajectories in North Carolina. Familial encouragement, rooted in cultural values of a *moral education*, provides a powerful source of motivation, even when financial and academic support is limited. This moral and emotional support sustains student persistence and reinforces Latine student investment in higher education. However, strong familial support and encouragement alone cannot remedy the persistent inequalities that Latine students contend with higher education. Historically, Latine students' linguistic and cultural differences have been treated as deficits,

placing the burden of achievement on students and families and reinforcing racialized inequities in the Nuevo South.

Recommendations for practice include:

- Ensure that the student-facing higher education workforce (advisors, faculty, staff) at both CCs and universities are prepared to offer personalized transfer advising that validates the lived experiences of Latine students through asset-based approaches.
- Strengthen networks of Latine professionals and faculty mentors to support entry into high-demand career pathways such as tech, teaching, and health care.
- Expand partnerships across K-12 and postsecondary institutions to address information gaps in support of Latine students' college transitions.
- Provide guidance for Latine students to navigate the complex admission and financial aid environment. Promote an understanding of resources in NC such as NC College Connect<sup>4</sup>, NC Transfer Guides<sup>5</sup>, NC Promise<sup>6</sup>, the NC Next Scholarship<sup>7</sup>, and the NC Need-Based Scholarship for Private College Students<sup>8</sup>.
- Pursue investments in eHSIs and HSIs that enroll high numbers of Latine students.

Latine students enter community colleges with strong aspirations to earn a baccalaureate degree and pursue meaningful careers that meet the state's workforce needs, driven not only by their own educational goals but also by a deep commitment to honoring familial sacrifice and expectations of upward mobility.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cfnc.org/nc-college-connect/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cfnc.org/plan-your-future/plan-for-college/transfer-student-planner/to-unc-system-institutions/transfer-guides/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.northcarolina.edu/impact/affordability-efficiency/nc-promise/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cfnc.org/pay-for-college/next-nc-scholarship/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cfnc.org/pay-for-college/apply-for-financial-aid/nc-need-based-scholarship-for-private-college-students/>

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<sup>iii</sup> Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.

<sup>iv</sup> Auerbach, S. (2006). “If the student is good, let him fly”: Moral support for college among Latino immigrant parents. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 5(4), 275-292. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532771xjle0504\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532771xjle0504_4); Jabbar, H., Serrata, C., Epstein, E., & Sánchez, J. (2019). “Échale ganas”: Family support of Latino/a community college students’ transfer to four-year universities. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 18(3), 258-276. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1390462>

<sup>v</sup> Excelencia in Education. (2025). Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): 2023-24. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education.

<sup>vi</sup> Excelencia in Education. (2025). Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institutions (eHSIs): 2023-24. Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education.

<sup>vii</sup> North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). (n.d.). *Curriculum program comparisons by student demographics*. <https://www.ncccommunitycolleges.edu/about-us/data-reporting/data-dashboards-page/curriculum-program-comparisons-by-student-demographics/>

<sup>viii</sup> CCCSE. (2023). Helping community college students climb the transfer ladder. <https://cccse.org/NR2023>

<sup>ix</sup> The University of North Carolina System. (2024). *Demographics*. [https://insight.northcarolina.edu/t/Public/views/db\\_transfer/Demographics](https://insight.northcarolina.edu/t/Public/views/db_transfer/Demographics)