Between 1999 and 2000, Hispanics became the second largest racial/ethnic population group in the United States with the majority of this population from Mexican origin (Aud et al., 2010). Within the Latino population, Ramirez and Del La Cruz (2003) identified “two-thirds (66.9%) were of Mexican origin, 14.3% were Central and South American, 8.6% were Puerto Rican, 3.7% were Cuban, and the remaining 6.5% were of other Hispanic origins” (p. 2). As this population has grown, the college enrollment rate of Latinx from high school to college increased from 54% to 70% since 2004 outpacing white and African American students (Santiago et al., 2015).

Understanding the disconnects that contribute to the opportunity gaps for Latinx students needs to be explored further from different points of view. There are a variety of factors that shape and challenge Latinx students’ aspirations and educational attainment with institutional type being important. For many Latinx college students, their postsecondary access and success is contextual with many attending Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018; Crisp, Núñez, & Carales, 2016) as well as two-year community colleges. However, while research on HSIs centers full-time students at four-year HSI campuses, the critical mass of Latinx students attend two-year HSIs (Núñez, Crisp, & Elizondo, 2015).

As there are well over 400 Hispanic-serving community colleges (HSCCs) their role in Latinx student transfer, mobility, and educational attainment relative to associate’s degrees and beyond are largely overlooked (Zamani-Gallaher, Yeo, Velez, Fox, & Samet, 2019). The number of associate degrees awarded to Latinx students more than doubled from 72,300 in 2003-2004 to 167,100 in 2013-2014 representing a 131% increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In 2013, Latinx were reported to be the second highest group enrolled in the community college sector at 20 percent with California and Texas serving the highest numbers of these students (Santiago et al., 2015).

When broken down by ethnicity, Hispanics represent the lowest numbers among those attaining doctorate degrees in the United States (National Science Foundation, 2018). For example, one-quarter of Chicana/o students in doctoral programs start their educational trajectory at the community college (Santiago et al., 2015; Solórzano et al., 2005). In 2013, 3% of Latinx attained master’s degrees and 0.5% completed doctoral degrees (Santiago et al., 2015). Therefore, Latinx faculty in higher education are significantly underrepresented at “just 4% of faculty (instruction and research), compared to Whites (74%), African American (7%), and Asian (6%)” (Santiago et al., 2015, p.16). Hence, Latinx students are less likely to see themselves represented in the faculty and subsequently the number of professors that reflect them in their classes is lacking.

Community College Outcomes for Latinx Students

Considering the population growth of Latinx in the United States and their increasing enrollment in higher education, there is a need to acknowledge community colleges as the primary educational sector that provides Latinx students an opportunity to attain higher education. Given the significant numbers of Chicana/o PhDs that start their educational trajectory at the community college,
Further exploration of the role of the community college in advancing doctoral degree attainment is warranted.

There are four main factors that influence Latinx students in choosing the community college as a pathway into higher education including insufficient guidance from high school personnel, financial concerns, family, and seeing the community college as a good place to begin their college education (Vega, 2017). Additionally, Latinx students experience four main barriers of part-time enrollment, financial challenges, academic obstacles, and limited access to information and resources that would prepare them to transfer that can interrupt, delay, or prevent them from transferring to a four-year college or university (Acevedo-Gil, 2018). Those Latinx who successfully navigate the community college to four-year university transfer pathway describe accomplishing this through the support of institutional agents at both two- and four-year institutions (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020; Tovar, 2015; Cortez & Castro, 2017). Support has also been identified through participating in student support programs, family, and people who are part of their social network (Castro & Cortez, 2016; Jabbar et al., 2019; Vega, 2017).

Latinx Community College Transfer Students and Transfer-Responsive Cultures

Research has noted the necessity of expanding our understanding of Latinx academic and social integration in an effort to understand and build students’ navigational capital (Andrade 2018; Castro & Cortez, 2016; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020). These studies find that Latinx community college transfer students are marginalized as a result of their racial/ethnic identity, age, class, and perceived abilities (Castro & Cortez, 2016) and developed spatial awareness of comfort spaces where they selectively engaged in moments of socio-academic, nonsocial, and nonacademic integration (Andrade, 2018). The support of institutional agents and their families was identified as critical for students who are successful at their sending and receiving institutions, and by their families (Castro & Cortez, 2016; Cortez & Castro, 2017; Dowd et al., 2013; Jain, Bernal, & Herrera, 2020). As such, wrap around support services, sense of belonging and connectedness to familial ties, to campus resources such as mentoring, involvement in campus activities and community engagement are found to contribute to Latinx student success (Sáenz, Segovia, Viramontes, Lopez, & Rodríguez, 2020).

Although research on the post-transfer outcomes for Latinx community college transfer students is limited, literature documenting their experiences in STEM majors describe facing challenges with academic and social integration into these fields (Valenzuela, 2006; Hagler, 2015). Latinx community college transfer students enrolled at a highly selective private four-year institution often experience ‘transfer shock’ (Cobian, 2008; Rivera, 2007). Further, Rivas (2012) highlighted transfer navigational tools used by Chicana transfer students while they were at the four-year institution and as they applied to graduate school.

Promising Practices: Ph.D. Access and Completion Among Latinx

When it comes to the success of racial/ethnic groups in higher education and within doctoral studies in the United States, as previously stated Latinx born citizens are the most underrepresented population attaining doctoral degrees (Aud et al., 2010; Santiago et al., 2015; Solórzano et al., 2005). Even though there has been a small increase in the number of Latinx students completing graduate degrees, these numbers remain low when considering this population’s growth in the United States over the last four decades. Several institutions and organizations have created programs to specifically advance equitable representation at the doctoral level.

Community College to Ph.D. (CC2PhD) Association at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

The Community College to Ph.D. (CC2PhD) Association at UCLA is a registered campus organization whose mission addresses the underrepresentation of community college alumni in Ph.D. programs. Students in the CC2PhD participate in twice-a-month video conference meetings with a CC2PhD Graduate Student Mentor, monthly meetings with a CC2PhD Community College Faculty Advisor, monthly discussion sessions with a CC2PhD Peer Advisor, and monthly Saturday Academies at UCLA. As part of the program, participants engage in and complete five major activities including: 1) complete a qualitative interview research project, 2) apply for summer undergraduate research programs, 3) develop an upper-division research proposal that will be used to apply for undergraduate research programs and research grants at their future four-year college, 4) present their interview research project and their upper-division research proposal, and 5) develop a Ph.D. preparation plan for their upcoming junior and senior year. The long-term goal of the CC2PhD program is for CC2PhD Scholar alumni to become more competitive Ph.D. applicants (Community College to PhD Association at UCLA, n.d.).
Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF) Program

Another promising program at the university level that supports Latinx students pursuit of a Ph.D. is the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUF) program, part of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation initiatives to increase the diversity of faculty in higher education institutions. The fellowship provides participants with many forms of support including regular, structured programming; faculty mentoring; term-time stipends for research activities; support for summer research; and repayment of undergraduate loans up to $10,000 provided that fellows pursue doctoral study in eligible fields (The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019). This initiative also includes post-collegiate programming that complements and sustains the undergraduate initiative and supports fellows as they enter and complete graduate school. Through grants to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, two nonprofit organizations with proven track records in training graduate students and academics, the Mellon Foundation provides PhD-bound MMUF fellows with a targeted array of graduate initiatives. These include conferences, writing seminars, and grants designed to support fellows at critical junctures in graduate school. MMUF’s support continues into fellows’ postdoctoral careers with the SSRC’s Ph.D. Retreat and Woodrow Wilson’s Junior Faculty Career Enhancement Fellowship program (The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019).

McNair Scholars Program

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair Scholars Program) is a TRIO federally funded program by the U.S. Department of Education (2007) that prepares first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented students in Ph.D. programs across the country in all fields of study. One of their intended initiatives is to diversify faculty in colleges and universities nationwide. The McNair Scholars Program at the University of Central Florida reported that 100% of their Latinx scholars complete their bachelor’s degrees and have higher opportunities to attend graduate school (Excelencia in Education, 2019).

Professional Associations

The American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Inc. (AAHHE) is committed to supporting Latinx in completing their Ph.D. degrees and seeking faculty, administration, and policymaker positions in higher education. The association created a Latino/a Graduate Fellows Program that provides doctoral students an opportunity to attend the national conference where they meet and network with Latinx professors and administrators to receive guidance that helps them navigate the complexities of higher education (American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, 2019). Within the community college sector, The National Community College Hispanic Council is a professional organization that prepares and supports Latinx leaders. Professionals involved in this council receive resources and opportunities to network with others in the field of education (National Community College Hispanic Council, 2019).

Future Directions

This article provides insights into what community colleges offer Latinx students as both a transfer pathway to attaining their undergraduate degrees and motivating Latinx students to pursue graduate education. The research and practice presented reflects the contributions the community college, especially minority serving community colleges in expanding access, equitable experiences, and improved outcomes as MSCCs, particularly HSCCs can be an asset to the educational and professional trajectory for Latinx students (Baber, Zamani-Gallaher, Stevenson, & Porter, 2019; Fox, Thrill, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2017; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2019). Little research has explored community college student pathways to the doctorate (Zamani-Gallaher, Turner, Brown-Tess, & Thrill, 2017). Our research endeavors to further understand how Latinx students in particular benefit from community colleges and may strategically use the community college as a way to navigate and negotiate their educational goals and career trajectories from the associates degree to the PhD. Additionally, community colleges have had a significant impact on postbaccalaureate degree attainment across student populations given in the past decade 46% of students who completed a bachelor’s degree enrolled at a community college (Shapiro, et al., 2018). As more students and namely Latinx students rely on the community college as a pathway into higher education, it is overdue to have additional attention paid to how the two-year college sector can be pivotal for not just postsecondary education entry but completion of the highest postsecondary credentials – the PhD.

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Those Latinx who successfully navigate the community college to four-year university transfer pathway describe accomplishing this through the support of institutional agents at both two- and four-year institutions.
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*Often Hispanic, Latina/o, and Latinx are used interchangeably in the literature. However, this article primarily employs Latinx as it is a gender neutral/nonbinary term referring to those of Latin American origin or descent.*