

MAMÁS UNIDAS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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THE BARRIERS
to Higher Education
For Hispanic Students

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Introduction

Arkansas is home to a rapidly growing Hispanic population, yet Hispanic students still face serious barriers to higher education, including:

- High cost of college
- Limited guidance from school counselors
- Language barriers in navigating admissions
- Anxiety around immigration status
- Lack of awareness about financial aid.



Mamás Unidas of Little Rock (MULR) partnered with our team, made up of Clinton School graduate students, to explore these issues and to develop community-based solutions.

Research Questions

- 1 What are the **barriers** to accessing higher education for the Hispanic community in Central Arkansas?
- 2 What **best practices** and **recommendations** for MULR can we identify to better support the Hispanic community better?
- 3 What **key resources** can be identified to support immigrant Hispanic students and families in overcoming these challenges?



Literature Review

To ground the study theoretically and empirically, we reviewed existing literature on barriers to higher education for Hispanic communities in the U.S. Research highlights persistent systemic barriers, including limited economic resources, exclusionary education and immigration policies, and inadequate school support systems. Hispanic students frequently report feeling unsupported by counselors who lack awareness of challenges tied to undocumented status. ^{1,2} Many must rely on out-of-pocket payments or limited scholarships, which often fail to cover total costs. ³

Family and cultural dynamics also shape access. Parents may prioritize immediate financial stability over long-term educational goals, especially for first-generation students. Cultural values emphasizing collectivism and caregiving often lead students to delay or forgo academic pursuits in favor of family responsibilities. ^{5,6} These insights show the need for support that helps families balance education with caregiving responsibilities. Mamás Unidas can meet this need by offering additional mentorship, and guidance tailored to both students and parents.



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Methods

The study utilized a mixed methods approach, retrieving data through the means of qualitative and quantitative tools.

Qualitative Tools	Quantitative Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interview (3 High School Students)• Focus Groups (1 with High School Students, 1 with Parents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• College Student Survey (97 Respondents)• Parent Survey (85 Respondents)• High School Survey (56 Respondents, via MULR)

All data collection tools were reviewed and approved by the University of Arkansas Fayetteville Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Overview of Findings

Percieved Cost of College

- 90% of college students said that the **cost of college** was a key factor in their decision.
- Students and parents are uncertain how to access or apply for **scholarships** and **grants**.

“Sometimes you see it [paying for college] as impossible...because we don't have the knowledge [and] that there are resources available or scholarships available... to help our children.”

- Parent

“Scholarship and grants applications were also challenging because I did not know much about them.”

- College Student

**College Students
Mostly Pay
for College by
Scholarships**



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Overview of Findings, Cont.

Inadequate Guidance

- **37%** of college students and **34%** of high schoolers said they received **no help** with college admissions.
- **89%** of parents had **no one to ask** questions about the process besides MULR.

“You rarely ever see them [Counselors]... some days they're there, some days they're not.”
- High School Student

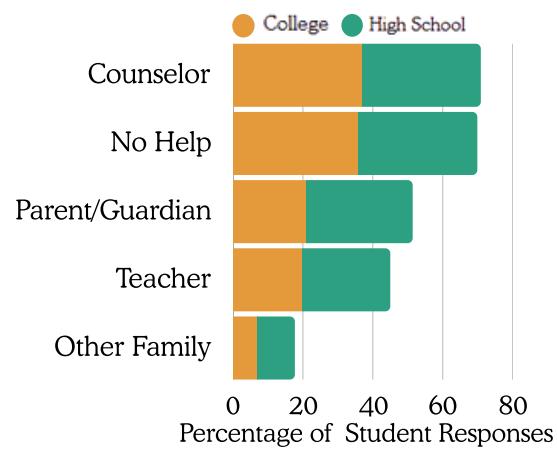
Language Barriers

89% of parents reported that they speak Spanish at home. To make the matter even more evident, **86%** of high school students reported that they speak Spanish at home.



Many students who speak both English and Spanish often have to translate resources for their parents, which they often do not understand themselves.

Most Students Report Receiving Help from a Counselor or No Help



- **30%** of high school students do not feel confident applying to college
- **60%** of college students found the process **challenging**.

“I feel like we should learn more about college at a younger level.....I feel like they should really give us more time to prepare, because it's better to know more than to learn less and to be rushed”

High School Student

Immigration Anxiety

- Students worry about how undocumented status affects their **eligibility** for financial aid and college access.

“I’d also like to say that because of this political atmosphere I worry about the opportunities that might be available and how that might impact me.”

- High School Student

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Discussion & Recommendations

Discussion

This study highlights persistent barriers to higher education for Hispanic students in Central Arkansas, including financial strain, limited guidance, language barriers, and concerns tied to immigration status. Many students lack early exposure to college planning resources and often rely on peers or siblings for support. Families frequently feel disconnected from the process due to language and information gaps, which lowers confidence in navigating admissions and financial aid systems.

While this study's findings are consistent with extant literature, which empirically linked lack of educational access of Hispanic students to financial limitations, exclusionary educational policies and inadequate support systems, it revealed further that many of the students are very concerned about how immigration status and how the current political atmosphere in the country impact their eligibility for scholarships, and other opportunities that affect the possibility of their college education.

Recommendations

- Earlier College Prep Support:** Start college-readiness activities earlier, including info sessions, class visits, and mentorship from 8th or 9th grade onward.
- Financial Aid & Scholarship Workshops:** Host a step-by-step workshop that covers: types of scholarships, how to find them, application walkthroughs, and interview prep.
- Update Website:** Update current scholarship offerings and highlight more scholarship applications

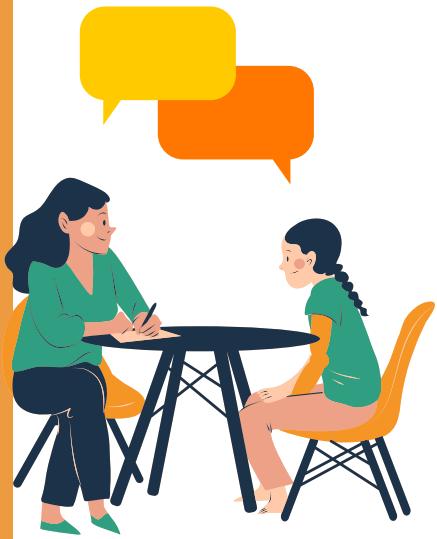


Guidance Counselor Partnerships:

- Digital Resource Packet with tools to support high-achieving Hispanic students
- Simple Referral Form for counselors to connect families with Mamás Unidas
- “Lunch & Learn” sessions to build relationships and share equitable advising strategies

Peer Mentorship Program:

- Connect Hispanic high school students with Hispanic college mentors
- Build on the Mijo model for personalized guidance.
- Encourage cultural connection and role models



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Recommendations

- **Recommendations for Future Research:**
 - Include participants from more areas across Arkansas
 - Collect data over time to track impact of interventions

Ultimately, the collective effort of this participatory study is to **identify and address barriers** to educational access for the Hispanic community in central Arkansas. Consistent with existing literature, the study has empirically demonstrated that this community faces limited access to higher education. These challenges include the perceived cost of attendance, lack of guidance, language barriers, and immigration status, all of which contribute to low confidence in the college admissions process.

To promote greater equity, we recommend **earlier intervention** in the college readiness pipeline, expanding **scholarship workshops**, and increasing **access to key resources**. We also recommend establishing **mentorship opportunities** that connect high school and college students, along with robust **online and in-person resource hubs**. These additional resources can also help address questions and navigate the college systems.



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