

Retaining Latino college students to degree completion has never been more important or as [challenging](#). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Latino college student enrollment was increasing at [historic rates](#); however, [Latino and Black college students took the largest hit](#) (into the double digits) during the pandemic and [those concerning trends are continuing](#). In order for Latino college student enrollment and retention to recover to its pre-pandemic levels, it is in our best interest to explore ways to narrow the achievement gap.

A lot of universities have adopted [First Year Seminar](#) classes as a means to help first-year students connect to the university, navigate the new college environment and stay in school. However, we have begun to wonder if we could take things a step further and explore the impact of introductory courses that are specific to Latino and Latin American Studies for Latino students. Would learning about and personally connecting to class content that is relevant to their history and ethnic identity help? One study has specifically looked at the [impact of Chicano Studies](#) classes on first generation Latino students' college transition (Nuñez, 2011). They found positive connections. Another study, considered the impact of [Black Studies](#) classes on academic engagement for Black students and found similar positive results (Adams, 2005).

However, we know from the data that college retention for Latino students is more nuanced than staying in college for only one or two years. (We discussed those differences before the pandemic in an earlier [OLLAS blog post](#)). Latino students face unique challenges throughout their entire college careers; therefore, capturing a true picture of their academic journey over time might help capitalize on resources that are already available to many of our students.

Case in point, are there measurable benefits to students who take Latino/Latin American coursework? If so, do Latino students *in particular*, show any advantages for having taken such coursework? Also, do these courses help students over the long-term? As instructors but also institutionally, this is our goal. And as such, this is what we aimed to find out.

At UNO, traditionally, there are three classes offered through the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies as part of their program--LLS1000 (Latin America: An Introduction), LLS1010 (Introduction to Chicano/Latino Studies: Social Sciences), and LLS1020 (Introduction to Chicano/Latino Studies: Humanities)--focusing on contemporary Latin America and U.S. Latinos' history, culture, and societies. These courses can be taken anytime, not just during the student's first year, and each meets two general education requirements.

What does the data tell us about the importance of Latino/Latin American coursework

One glimpse into the importance of the LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020 courses comes from NSSE data. The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects information from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about first-year and senior students' participation in programs and activities that are provided for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of what undergraduates gain from attending college. In 2016, again in 2019 and once more in 2022, all told almost 3,000 UNO students completed the NSSE. This allowed us to compare the responses of students who've received credit for either LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020 to those who have not, above and beyond the effect of another course (Intro-duction to Psychology specifically). A number of notable differences emerged.

The largest impact was on students' perceived gains (i.e.: the degree to which students reported having made gains in a variety of personal, practical, and general education competencies as a result of their undergraduate education). Students who received LLS credit reported 10.13% more perceived gains than those who had not. Similarly, they also responded to having a better educational experience overall (by 7.57%). Moreover, LLS credit was associated with students being 8.71% more likely to indicate that they would go to UNO again, if they were to start over.

Perhaps the most important difference, however, was how supportive the school environment was. This measure is meant to reflect how much an institution emphasizes services and activities that support student development. For example, "how much does your institution encourage contact among students from different social, racial/ethnic, religious backgrounds"? Having received LLS credit was tied to 7.25% higher ratings in the supportive environment ratings of students in general. Meanwhile, the effect was more pronounced for Latino students (specifically, they were 13.62% higher for having received LLS credit).

These data hint that LLS coursework is related to more positive reports from students of their university experience overall. The question remains, do these benefits translate to improvement in students' academic performance? And again, do Latino students *in particular*, show any advantages for having taken Latino/Latin American coursework?



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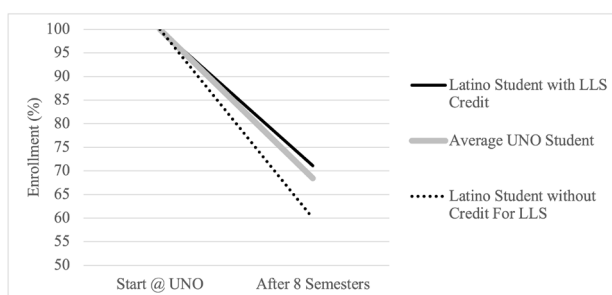
Using UNO enrollment data to answer these questions

The UNO's Office of Institutional Effectiveness shared enrollment data for every student starting Fall of 2015 through the fall semester of 2021. This afforded us the chance to conduct multilevel analyses of the patterns of change over time, nesting each and every semester across students. Specifically, for each semester, we had information whether the students enrolled, the number credits they signed up for, the number of credits they earned, their overall credits at the end of the semester and their term GPA. All told, we had 160,493 semesters of data for 19,012 students (2,420 of whom were Latino). This allowed us to analyze changes across each semester. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also accounted for. Finally, at the student level, the models examined differences in ethnicity (whether the students were Latino or not) and whether they received credit for having taken LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020. A number of statistically significant effects emerged.

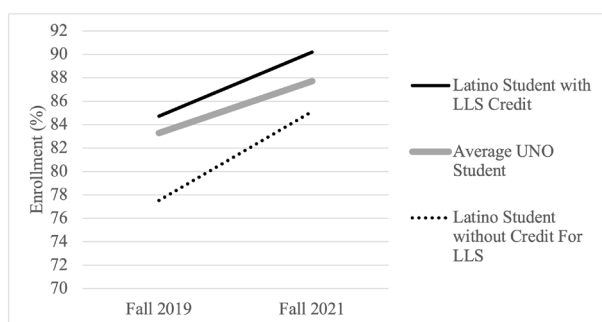
For example, in general, all students were 6.33% more likely to enroll consistently at UNO if they have received credit for taking LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020. These students also had slightly higher term GPAs (1.64% higher).

Benefits for Latino students in particular

Several benefits were stronger among Latino students, one of which was on enrollment. As portrayed in the figure below, the percentage of students who enroll consistently each semester tends to drop over time. However, this drop is markedly less pronounced among Latino students who have received credit for LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020.



There was an additional benefit for Latino students' enrollment, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Latino students who have received credit for LLS1000, LLS1010 or LLS1020 enrolled more consistently during COVID-19.



The numbers tell the story

These are very compelling results. Taking Latino and Latin American Studies coursework does markedly enhance students' educational experience, in various ways. And these patterns persisted during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

One of the most encouraging parts of these results is that introducing, offering, and enrolling Latino students in Latino-based curriculum is actionable and achievable. Two-year and four-year institutions could realistically make modest changes such as offering Latino and Latin American Studies courses to Latinos that can have lasting impacts on these students, and everyone else.

References/Additional Readings

- Adams, T.A. (2005). Establishing intellectual space for Black students in predominantly White universities through Black Studies. *The Negro Educational Review*, 56(4), 285-299.
- Nuñez, A. (2011). Counterspaces and connections in college transitions: First-generation Latino students' perspectives on Chicano Studies. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(6), 639-655. [doi:10.1353/csd.2011.0077](https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0077).

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