

SOCIOCRITICAL MATTERS: MIGRANT STUDENTS' COLLEGE ACCESS BY ANNE-MARIE NÚÑEZ AND RYAN EVELY GILDERSLEEVE.

Programs that focus on traditional academic learning and “college knowledge” are important for all students who want to further their education. However, the research indicates that the focus on sociocritical learning is essential for migrant students, and others from less advantaged communities.

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This report focuses on the obstacles migrant students face in gaining access to college and suggests some programmatic ways to respond that will empower students to achieve at their appropriate levels.

Written by Anne-Marie Núñez and Ryan Evely Gildersleeve, both associate professors of Higher Education, Núñez at the University of Texas at San Antonio and Gildersleeve at the University of Denver, the paper uses research data from a particular program, the Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI) in California, to highlight the situation of students and optimal ways to improve their access.

Migrant students are defined here as children in families who have migrated to engage in seasonal farming or fishing work or as immigrants themselves. The majority of these migrant students are Latinx.

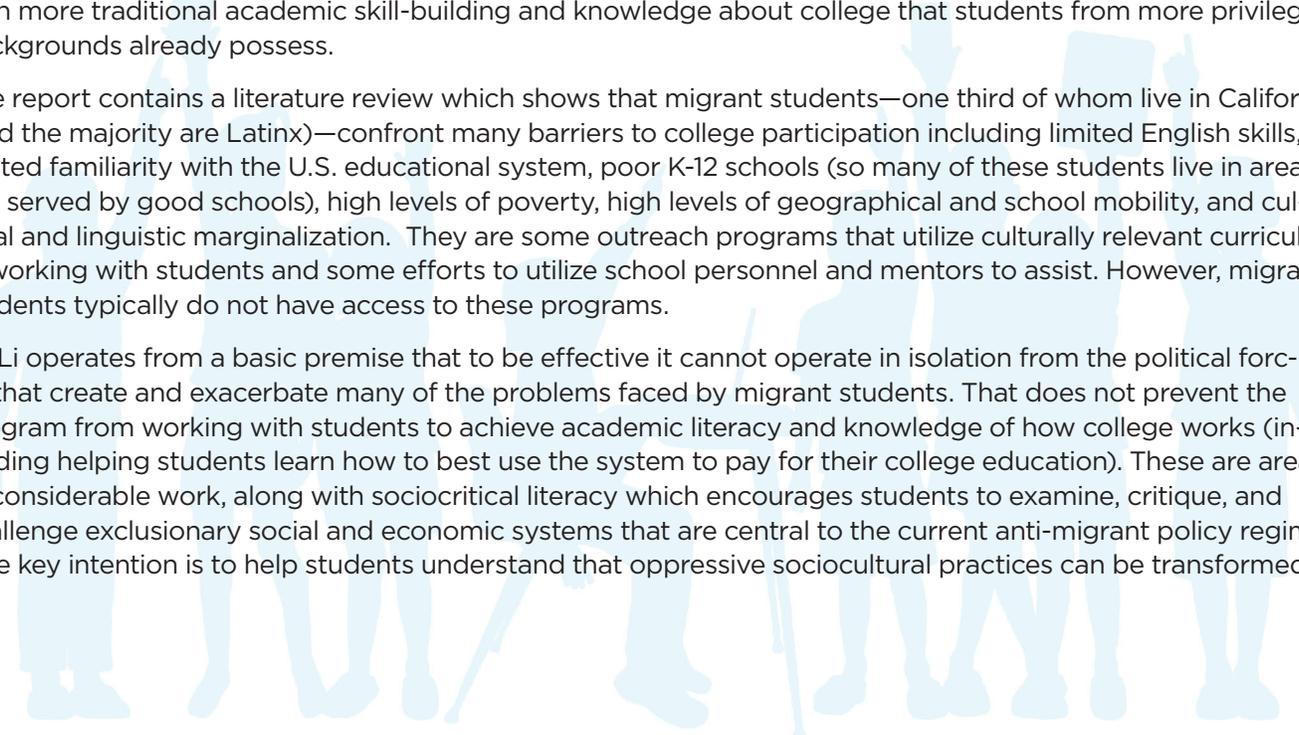
According to various studies, these students typically forego applying to and attending selective colleges for which they may be academically qualified, termed “undermatching,” and those who attend less competitive schools are less likely than others to complete their degrees. In addition, the adoption of limitations on affirmative action and bilingual education, as well as anti-immigrant legislation, in some states has had a negative impact on college application rates among migrant students. There are of course many complications in the social nexus of these students.

The authors identify what they call the “anti-migrant educational policy regime” to describe what they see, following Foucault on the genealogy of prisons, as the systemic view of migrant students as underachievers, uninvited in the first place, and outside normal educational opportunity structures.

They suggest that helping students understand this regime and ways to overcome it is an important method of empowering them to create their own pathways to achievement. That is why the MSLI program works to develop sociocritical literacy among the students. This literacy is defined as “sense-making practices in relation to social and political contexts that shape their educational opportunities.” The students are also helped with more traditional academic skill-building and knowledge about college that students from more privileged backgrounds already possess.

The report contains a literature review which shows that migrant students—one third of whom live in California (and the majority are Latinx)—confront many barriers to college participation including limited English skills, limited familiarity with the U.S. educational system, poor K-12 schools (so many of these students live in areas not served by good schools), high levels of poverty, high levels of geographical and school mobility, and cultural and linguistic marginalization. They are some outreach programs that utilize culturally relevant curricula in working with students and some efforts to utilize school personnel and mentors to assist. However, migrant students typically do not have access to these programs.

MSLi operates from a basic premise that to be effective it cannot operate in isolation from the political forces that create and exacerbate many of the problems faced by migrant students. That does not prevent the program from working with students to achieve academic literacy and knowledge of how college works (including helping students learn how to best use the system to pay for their college education). These are areas of considerable work, along with sociocritical literacy which encourages students to examine, critique, and challenge exclusionary social and economic systems that are central to the current anti-migrant policy regime. One key intention is to help students understand that oppressive sociocultural practices can be transformed.



MSLI is an annual five-week summer program conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Students who have completed their junior year of high school are nominated to participate by school officials based on their academic and leadership abilities. The goals are to effect improvement in student's motivation, persistence, leadership, literacy, social science knowledge and college participation. Most MSLI students are enrolled in under-resourced high schools.

The bulk of the report reviews findings from research, both quantitative and qualitative, into the outcomes of the MSLI program. Statistics are offered about enrollment in various types of California public colleges—highly selective four-year institutions, less selective four-year programs, and the state's community college system. There also was comparison between the outcome for MSLI participants and others not part of the program but from similar backgrounds.

There were significantly higher levels of application to the more selective schools by MSLI students, as well as higher levels of application to at least one University of California campus. These and other statistical results demonstrate the positive impact MSLI has on migrant students who participate.

Reporting on qualitative research (utilizing multiple-session, in-person interviews) provided evidence in line with the quantitative outcomes. These interviews sought to capture the everyday experiences of students as they sought to make sense of their high school experiences in relation to their college aspirations.

One of each student's major projects was creating an action plan for graduating from high school by applying their program learning in their home communities—a process which seems to have helped many stay focused on college admission as they finished high school. At the same time, the program focused students on the sociocritical reality so that they could begin to see ways to overcome obstacles.

Of course, spending five weeks on the UCLA campus was a significant shift in social surroundings and helped some see that they too belong at college, and to begin to understand the type of school and campus environment they desired. They also were able to observe the obvious divisions by race and nationality between the those who make and serve the meals and clean the campus and those who run the institution. Just having as much good food as you can eat at each meal was a powerful experience for some.

Another key component is the stress on improving writing skills through daily tutorial sessions. Students had to do at least four essays over the five weeks, focused on four genres: extended definition, analytical prose, argumentation, and autobiography. All students saw this as important, and some began to identify as writers. Sociocritical thinking was central here, helping them see how personal experiences are implicated in broader social contexts. Students were required to utilize social theory as they engaged in library, field and ethnographic research to help them contextualize the contexts of their home communities.

Finally, the program helped students learn about financial aid and the systems that control it, both in terms of opening up the mechanics of the application process and in helping them confront the obstacles they face through systems of economic and political exclusion.

Programs that focus on traditional academic learning and “college knowledge” are important for all students who want to further their education. But the research indicates that the focus on sociocritical learning is essential for migrant students, and others from less advantaged communities. Students identified that being invited to write about personal, family and community histories—and expressing themselves in the language(s) with which they are most comfortable—not only helped them feel more connected with writing, an essential college skill, but also helped them challenge assumptions that students from non-English speaking families cannot learn to write. This empowered them to be more willing and able to confront the anti-migrant policy regime (including the way it is so often internalized). The same is true about affirmative action policies.

In short, students used sociocritical literacy to transform the notion of belonging. They learned they belong. And this not only helps with college but during the rest of their lives.

The authors identify certain limitations in the research, including in some cases small samples as well as selection bias toward participants. Further, English was the dominant language of most of the interviewer, which led to an underrepresentation of Spanish-speaking participants. Even so, nearly all MSLI participants reported high rates of satisfaction with the program. There is an extensive list of relevant academic references at the conclusion of the report.

Núñez, Anne-Marie, and Ryan Evely Gildersleeve. (2014). "Sociocritical Matters: Migrant Students' College Access." *Educational Policy*, 30, vol 3, 1-35.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273116782_Sociocritical_Matters_Migrant_Students'_College_Access



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This annotated bibliography was compiled by TIES for *Our Neighborhood*.