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## Latinos Lag in Finishing College, Report Says

By Stuart Silverstein, Times Staff Writer

Latino college students drop out of school far more frequently than their white counterparts and earn bachelor's degrees less than half as often, according to a new national report by USC-affiliated researchers.

The study found that even Latinos with the best high school academic backgrounds lag whites with similar backgrounds in receiving four-year college degrees.

Researchers said the findings have major implications for California, where Latinos account for one-third of the state's high school graduates and where public university campuses have widely varying graduation rates.

In all, the analysis released Wednesday by the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of

USC's Annenberg School for Communication, reported that 23.2% of Latino college freshmen earn bachelor's degrees by age 26, versus 47.3% of whites.

Previous research has shown that Latinos drop out of high school much more often than whites, but among students who finish high school, Latinos are just as likely as whites to go on to college.

The latest Pew report, however, reveals a new issue: Latinos who start college don't fare as well academically as whites.

"The tragedy is that too few of them are getting bachelor's degrees," said Richard Fry, the author of the report and a senior research associate at the Washington-based center.

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Although the Pew report focused on college performances of Latinos and non-Latino whites, it also noted that 29.5% of black college freshmen and 50.7% of their Asian American counterparts earn four-year degrees by age 26. The findings were drawn from a national sampling of 13,000 students who were tracked from 1988, when they were in eighth grade, until 2000.

The report partly attributed the lower graduation rate of Latinos to their greater tendency to attend community colleges or less-selective four-year schools, where fewer students in total go on to earn four-year degrees.

Fry said the college performance of Latinos also is undermined by a variety of social factors, including the higher rates at which they enroll part-time rather than full-time, delay beginning college and share in financial responsibility for their families. In addition, he said Latino students are more likely than whites to live at their family's home rather than on campus.

"You're probably much more likely to be socially and academically engaged, with school as your first priority," if you're living on campus, Fry said. "Latinos, unfortunately, don't have that advantage [in many cases], and that probably detracts from their success."

Even among the best-prepared students at top colleges with high graduation rates, Latinos lagged whites somewhat. According to the report, at the most selective institutions — a category including UCLA and UC Berkeley — 83% of Latinos graduate, versus 90% of whites, by age 26.

At "non-selective institutions" — a category including most California State University campuses — the gap is wider. In that category, the graduation rate is 57% for Latinos, and 81% for whites.

Mitzye Ramos, an anthropology student at Cal State Northridge and the daughter of Honduran immigrants, has faced some of the issues often encountered by college-qualified Latinos. She graduated in June 1999 from St. Mary's Academy, a girls college prep high school in Inglewood, and then enrolled at UC Berkeley.

But Ramos, 23, whose father passed away more than 10 years ago and who is the sixth of seven children, said the cost of college was a heavy burden.

In addition, Ramos said it was a "culture shock" living among students from affluent homes. When they would complain about their financial problems, she said, "I had to bite my tongue so many times."

So, Ramos returned to Southern California and resumed her studies first at Santa Monica College, and then at Cal State Northridge.

Cal State Northridge has one of the lowest graduation rates among all California public universities — only 30.2% of students who enroll as freshmen receive a bachelor's degree from the campus within six years, according to the latest numbers. Even so, Ramos is confident she will earn her degree by next spring.

In fact, Ramos says her family's Latino immigrant background is helping propel her through college.

"For our parents, for us to become successful is to live out their American dream, so their immigrating here wasn't in vain. I always remember that when I go to class."

Nationally, taking students of all backgrounds into account who begin their studies at four-year

schools, the latest federal figures show that 58.2% earn a bachelor's degree within six years. The University of California system reports a higher rate, 77.9%. For UC's underrepresented minorities — a category including Latinos, blacks and American Indians — the rate is 69.1%.

But in the 23-campus Cal State system, only 42% of freshmen graduate from the campus where they began their studies within six years.

That percentage, however, doesn't take into account students who begin at one Cal State campus and later complete their studies at another school in the system. When those students are taken into account and when students are tracked over a 10-year period, the graduation rate rises to 60%.

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