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Introduction to the Special Issue:
Student Experience in Latin American Higher Education

Maria Veronica Santelices

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Facultad de Educación
Millennium Nucleus Student's Experience in Higher Education in Chile:
Expectations and Realities
Chile

Sergio Celis

Universidad de Chile, FCFM, Escuela de Ingeniería y Ciencias
Millennium Nucleus Student's Experience in Higher Education in Chile:
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Chile

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<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7549> This article is part of the special issue, *Student Experience in Latin American Higher Education*, guest edited by María Verónica Santelices and Sergio Celis.

Abstract: In this introduction, the guest editors present an overview of the 11 articles that make up the special issue on student experience in Latin American higher education. The introduction provides context about the higher education sector in Latin America, draws attention to the main features of the articles, and highlights common themes across them. The guest editors also comment on the parallels and contrasts with the student experience discussed by the literature from other geographical locations. Based on the preparation and publication of the special issue, suggestions for further research are provided.

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Introducción a número especial: Experiencia estudiantil en la educación superior de América Latina

Resumen: En esta introducción, los editores invitados presentan un panorama de los once artículos que componen el número especial sobre experiencia estudiantil en la educación superior Latinoamericana. La introducción proporciona contexto sobre el sector de educación superior en América Latina, presenta las características principales de los artículos y destaca los temas comunes entre ellos. Los editores invitados también comentan los paralelismos y contrastes con la experiencia estudiantil discutida por la literatura de otras latitudes. En base a la preparación y publicación del número especial, se brindan sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras-clave: experiencia estudiantil; educación superior; América Latina

Introdução ao número especial: Experiência estudantil no ensino superior na América Latina

Resumo: Nesta introdução, os editores convidados apresentam um panorama dos onze artigos que compõem a edição especial sobre experiência estudantil na educação superior da América Latina. A introdução contextualiza o setor de ensino superior na América Latina, chama a atenção para as principais características dos artigos e destaca temas comuns entre eles. Os editores convidados também apontam as semelhanças e diferenças em relação à experiência estudantil discutida pela literatura de outras regiões geográficas. Com base na preparação e publicação da seção especial, são fornecidas sugestões para novas pesquisas.

Palavras-chave: experiência do aluno; ensino superior; América Latina

Introduction to the Special Issue: Student Experience in Latin American Higher Education

This special issue on *higher education student experience in Latin America* provides an overview of how students experiment with tertiary education both inside and outside the classroom. The contributions to this issue dive into student data and student voices to understand how their experiences occur in Latin American systems marked by significant institutional and social transformations. Higher Education in Latin America has undergone increased access and massification (Schwartzman, 2020), as well as multiple reforms dealing with its structure, governance, operations, and funding (Bernasconi & Celis, 2017). Correspondingly, access, student learning, and funding issues have received increasing attention in the literature (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020). Despite a Latin American tradition of studies on students' social mobilization and participation in governance (Arocena & Sutz, 2005; Donoso, 2018; Ordorika, 2022), less emphasis has been placed on the student's academic and life experiences.

International scholarship on the student experience in higher education has examined students' interaction with the institution (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993), with peers (Biancani & MacFarland, 2013), professors and instructors (Mayhem et al., 2016) as well as from psychological (Bowman, 2010) and academic perspectives, including learning styles and student engagement (Hu & McCormick, 2012). Research has also referred to different groups of students (e.g., first-generation, low-income, specific gender, and Indigenous, see Sumida Huaman et al. 2019; Pike & Kuh, 2005), different types of institutions (e.g., Crozier et al., 2008; O'Banion &

Culp, in press) and different academic trajectories, including the transition from secondary education (Kirst & Venezia, 2004), the encounter with and adjustment to higher education (Fayi Carter et al. 2013) and the transition to work (Hora, 2020).

Studies on student experiences in Latin America are almost absent in mainstream and international publications (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020), and the scholars that have studied these issues have adopted some of the conceptual lenses and research trends mentioned above. Studying the student experience in Latin America is challenging due to differences across income groups as well as differences across ethnic groups and disciplines by gender.

In the region, enrollment in higher education has more than doubled in almost two decades; it increased from 21% to 52% between 2000 and 2018 (World Bank, 2020), but disparities among countries remain. For example, Honduras increased from 3% in 1999 to 10% during 2014-2018, while in Chile, Colombia, and Peru, the increase was close to 20 percentage points between 2000 and 2013 (Ferreya et al., 2017).

Access increased in all income levels, including students from the lowest income groups; the 50% of the population with lower income increased its share in the total number of higher education students from 16% in 2000 to 24% in 2012. As measured by these proportions, the countries where inequality in higher education access was reduced the most are Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile. It went from 23-25% in 2000 to 40% in 2012 (Ferreya et al., 2017). However, disparities in access remain acute. Students in the highest income quintile have 45 percentage points more probability to enroll in higher education institutions than students in the lowest income quintile.

Differences by gender are significant by disciplines, with women highly represented in certain areas and scarcely participating in others (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] degrees). In Chile, for example, women account for less than a quarter of all STEM degrees (Hurtado, 2020), with somewhat higher participation in STEM programs at top-tier institutions (Kim & Celis, 2021).

Differences in the participation across income groups intersect with the types of institutions students attend. For instance, the enrollment in vocational education has increased in some countries, such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela (Brunner & Miranda, 2016). However, technical education plays a small role in Brasil, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico. Still, in countries like Chile, where 43% of the enrollment attends technical institutions, more than 50% of the students who attend technical institutions belong to the 50% of the lowest income groups in the country (Galleguillos et al., 2016).¹

Currently, different policies and strategies are being implemented to increase access for diverse students. Some of those strategies include expanding and diversifying higher education offerings to create multiple pathways between secondary and higher education, building and strengthening the legislative frameworks with monitoring bodies, using admission requirements to achieve access goals (e.g., quotas, bonus scores for targeted groups), and creating new higher education institutions in underserved regions (Unesco, 2020). Additionally, intercultural universities established in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Nicaragua offer programs based on Indigenous culture, and efforts for decolonizing the curriculum have advanced in the entire region (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021). One issue given increasing yet insufficient attention by policymakers and scholars is the inclusion of students with disabilities (Fuentes et al., 2021).

¹ Authors' analysis based on 2020 enrollment and institutional accreditation status from <https://www.mifuturo.cl/bases-de-datos-de-matriculados/> and from <https://www.mifuturo.cl/instituciones-de-educacion-superior-en-chile/>.

Preparation of the Special Issue

This special issue, published in two parts, was conceived as a vehicle to disseminate work on student experiences occurring in Latin America, in all its diversity, and its origins. Thus, we encouraged the analysis of the student experience from different disciplinary, theoretical, and conceptual perspectives and the problematization of issues by contrasting international literature, concepts, and assumptions with local findings. To reflect our regional differences, we welcomed articles in Spanish, Portuguese, and English language. The answer to this call was greater than expected. We received more than 90 proposals and selected 24 for a peer-review process. We privileged articles that used a distinct conceptual framework and an empirical approach to their investigation to make visible students' voices, work, and data.

The proposal submissions and the later work preparing and revising the manuscripts allowed us a broad and deep understanding of the work taking place in Latin America. We observed growing interest and research in the area of student experience, across a wide range of issues, including individual, institutional, disciplinary, and policy perspectives. We also noticed research undertaken in particular areas of the higher education curriculum as well as the measurement of the student experience. We consider this two-part special issue a robust sample and spearhead of exciting and relevant empirical work in our region.

Overview of the Special Issue

In the first and the second installments of the special issue we have attempted to present articles grouped by the themes from the national and international literature (Baik et al., 2015), following a longitudinal perspective of student transition and development (Coertjens et al., 2017; Kyndt et al., 2017). Thus, the articles are grouped in the themes of access and equity (Lopes & Gomes da Silva; Vidarte et al.), academic experience inside (Ávila Reyes et al.), and outside the classroom (Lobos et al.; Durso et al.), including student engagement (Carneiro & Pedreira; Zapata et al.) non-academic student experience (Goñi et al.; Meneses et al.), ending with the transition to the workplace (Minhoto et al.; Lloyd). Because of the volume and characteristics of the submissions, this special issue includes comparatively more articles describing the student academic and non-academic experience than articles that discuss themes of access and equity or transition to the workplace.

The first part of this special issue includes five studies conducted in three countries: Brazil (Carneiro & Pedreira; Durso et al.), Chile (Ávila Reyes et al.; Lobos et al.) and Mexico (Lloyd). Unsurprisingly, these three countries are also those with the highest number of previous works on student's experience in the region (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020). The second part expands on the work of authors from these three countries (Zapata et al. and Goñi et al. [Chile]; Meneses & Pogliaghi [Mexico]; Minhoto et al. and Lopes & Gomes da Silva [Brazil]) and includes higher education experiences in Colombia thanks to the work of Vidarte, Zambrano and Mattheis.

Each of these studies brings a specific issue regarding the experiences of students in different higher education settings. Durso et al. explore how individual and contextual factors influence students' resilience in Brazil's higher education accounting programs. Lobos et al. focus on multiple student support systems offered in several Chilean universities and investigates why students do not seek support. Carneiro and Pedreira analyze the association between different types of student engagement (curricular, extracurricular, and social and leisure) and personal characteristics, academic performance, and student pathways, at a research university in Brazil. Ávila Reyes et al. present a longitudinal study that shows how a group of undergraduate student experience academic writing in a selective Chilean university. Finally, Lloyd examines the college transition to the workforce in one of the first intercultural universities in Mexico.

In the second part of the special issue, Lopes and Gomes da Silva analyze the occupancy rate of the slots available through the Quotas Law at the Federal University of Alfenas in the period 2014-2019. They also examine the racial profiles of freshmen students and compare those characteristics to those that would have been observed in a scenario without the Quotas Law. Vidarte et al. describe the experience of students with disabilities at a private university system in Colombia. Meneses and Pogliaghi explore students' perspectives on the violence experienced in the upper secondary and undergraduate levels at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico. Goñi et al. focuses on the transition to university life of internal migrant students in Chile. Zapata et al. describe student engagement profiles for different undergraduate disciplines using survey data from universities across the country. Minhoto, Silvestre, Lopes de Souza and dos Reis report on how graduates of different sociodemographic and cultural profiles assess their educational experiences at the Universidade Federal de São Paulo. They also examine how assessment of the training experience relate to their individual and professional growth after graduation.

In terms of methods, qualitative data and analyses dominate the special issue with seven of the 11 articles reporting on data collected through interviews or focus groups. Quantitative studies use descriptive statistics, cluster methodology and linear regression analysis. Except for Carneiro and Pedreira, who estimated a quantitative model, the articles in the first part of the special issue use qualitative analyses based on interviews. Carneiro and Pedreira analyzed responses from 3,416 students, while the qualitative pieces interviewed an average of 22 students. Thus, the first part of the special issue combines students' data and voices to illustrate the richness and struggles of higher education students in Latin America. In the second part of the special issue, qualitative and quantitative methods are more equally distributed, with use of questionnaires (Zapata et al.; Lopes & Gomes da Silva) and administrative data (Minhoto et al.). Data from interviews and focus groups are used in the three remaining articles of the second part (Goñi et al.; Vidarte et al.; Meneses et al.).

Common Topics

The papers in this special issue show that *institutional and national authorities are concerned with the student' experience in higher education in Latin America*. The papers by Carneiro & Pedreira, Lloyd, Lobos et al., Ávila Reyes et al., Vidarte et al. and Lopes & Gomes da Silva show initial efforts by institutions to implement policies, curriculum, pedagogical and extracurricular activities that enhance the experience of higher education programs offer to different types of students. However, the articles by Meneses et al., Zapata et al., Vidarte et al., and Goñi et al. describe the difficulties students face in dealing with social and institutional structures and the rigidities imposed by the disciplines studied.

Institutional action to increase *equity in the access* of students from racial minorities, low-income groups (Lopes & Gomes da Silva), and students with physical or cognitive disabilities (Vidarte et al.) is more widely observed in the work we reviewed for this special issue than for other groups of students. The efforts to promote access to low-income students and racial minorities have been in place for a longer time and are likely to have influenced numerous students and accumulated more data.

Nevertheless, concern in other areas of the student experience and for other student groups is still incipient. Articles point to institutional efforts, intended to support students, and how often these *efforts fail to meet students' expectations and needs*. Carneiro and Pedreira found a curricular disengagement in engineering and some science and technology fields, suggesting outdated teaching methods or curricular content. Lobos et al. report several institutional barriers hindering students' help-seeking behavior, such as time overlap between support activities and regular courses, university personnel's lack of knowledge of student's support services, a mismatch between the

support offer and students' need, and lack of resources for mental health support. Durso et al. identified the lack of instructor availability, difficult relationship with peers due to a heterogeneous environment, distrust in distance learning strategies, and the university's reward system as sources of stress and adversity. Although highlighting the positive role instructors and peers in developing students' academic writing, Ávila Reyes et al. found that writing courses do not make sense to students who need them the most and absence of mention to valuable teaching writing skills in discipline-specific courses. Vidarte et al. described the challenges faced by students with disabilities because of unchanging physical infrastructure, administrative policies and curricular practices. Institutions still have plenty to do to achieve enriching experiences for all students, including students from different disciplines, since they are reported as still incomplete in design, implementation and/or evaluation.

The papers in this special issue also show the ways in which *student characteristics and student context*, outside the institution, *influence* how students experience higher education. Variables that affect students' well-being and help-seeking behavior are family demands (Durso et al.), work responsibilities (Durso et al.), and cultural expectations (Lobos et al.). Lloyd presents the most striking case of the role of *cultural expectations*, as graduates from intercultural health programs are seen as shamans, or witch doctors, by other municipal health care workers.

Ávila-Reyes et al. mention *students' families* as key sponsors for literacy and describes how familial influences define students' university experiences. Moreover, and as expected, students belonging to disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds or marginalized groups experienced stronger difficulties engaging, developing sense of belonging, and succeeding in their institutions (Ávila Reyes et al.; Carneiro & Pedreira; Durso et al.; Lobos et al.; and Lloyd).

Nevertheless, and despite institutional and external barriers, the articles in this issue coincide in showing *students as active agents* who engage and thrive, and who value their experiences in higher education. Students perceive institutions as places where they can expand their disciplinary knowledge (Lloyd) and professional opportunities (Durso et al.). They also find others who help them to improve key abilities, such as academic writing (Ávila Reyes et al.).

How students experience *violence* in its multiple forms (e.g., against women, as a result of political action and crime) as described by Meneses et al. may perhaps be seen as a very particular phenomenon observed only in Latin America. However, related accounts from the European or South African experience may help us anticipate some of the medium and long-term consequences of different forms of violence in the higher education system, institutions and students (Bovill et al. 2021; Wild 2016).

Further Research and Concluding Remarks

Based on the insight gained during the preparation this special issue, we can suggest areas for further research. We observed less work conducted in the experience of students with disabilities, students enrolled in technical education and the relationship between the academic experience of these students and national policies recently implemented. The experience of students in STEM fields, particularly women, the analysis of learning outcomes, and the transition to the labor market is also less present. Future research should address these areas.

Researchers could also explore how students collaborate and support each other in face of difficulties in Latin America and how that compares to what is observed in other parts of the world. The implications of violence in different areas of student life and the way in which higher education institutions respond to students' difficulties seem to be additional areas that offer particularities but also potential connection to the broader literature. We believe a more detailed perspective of the student experience would help programs and institutions better support the transition and

adjustment of students, particularly those that are the first in their families to access higher education. Future investigations should explore the role that institutional variables play in students' trajectories and college outcomes, in tandem and in interaction with students' characteristics. In addition, academic and nonacademic results of institutional and national policies need to be documented.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the online educational experience and distance learning, which has impacted especially hard students from low-income groups, women, minorities and under-represented groups, students living in remote areas, and special needs students. The consequences on these students' experiences are starting to emerge, but the effects on learning outcomes are yet to be understood and further investigated.

A smoother transition may help to increase retention and graduation rates, which remain a significant challenge in the region. Overall graduation rates of people between 25 and 29 years old, who have enrolled in a higher education institution, reaches 46% (Unesco, 2020). Only Mexico and Peru exhibit graduation rates closer to 65%, similar to those observed in countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, and the United States (Unesco, 2020). Graduation rates are generally lower for vocational tertiary education than for university students, which is consistent with higher dropout rates in vocational higher education than in universities. Data from Colombia (Ferreyra et al., 2017) shows a dropout rate of (53%) for non-university higher education and 37% for university higher education.

We believe increasing graduation rates is key to improving equity in the region since higher education still exhibits high economic returns in most countries (Ferreyra et al., 2017). On average, higher education in Latin America exhibits 104% return rate over the completion of secondary education. In most countries attending higher education for even a few years, and leaving without a certification, exhibits positive return rates (35%) when compared to only completing secondary education (Ferreyra et al. 2017). This is observed despite differences observed across disciplines and types of institution (technical versus university).

Promoting access is not enough for students to benefit more fully from the higher education experience. In order to improve persistence and graduation, access efforts need to go hand-in-hand with institutional conditions that ensure a successful trajectory of students. Understanding how institutions can better support the student experience is fundamental in a period when institutions are stressed in their financial and human resources as result of the COVID pandemic.

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About the Authors/Editors

María Verónica Santelices

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Email vsanteli@uc.cl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4062-0047>

Associate professor of the Faculty of Education of the Catholic University of Chile. Her work has been published in specialized journals such as the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Educational Psychological Measurement* and *Higher Education*. Her interests combine measurement and educational policies, focusing on access and performance issues in higher education. Her research has been funded by the National Research and Development Agency of Chile, through Fondecyt and Milenio projects, and by the Ministry of Education through FONIDE projects. She is the author of the books *The Quest for Equity in Chile's Higher Education: Decades of Continued Efforts* (Lexington Books) and *Equity in Higher*

Education. Design and Results of Access Programs in Selective Universities (Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile and CEPPE UC). She received her PhD in education from the University of California Berkeley and a master's in public policy from the same university.

Sergio Celis

Universidad de Chile

Email scelis@uchile.cl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0502-5608>

Assistant professor at the School of Engineering and Sciences of the University of Chile. His research focuses on higher education, particularly on science and technology. His main lines of research are the experience of students in the first years of engineering and science, the teaching of mathematics in open access institutions, academic experience in graduate programs, academic work, and research policies. He is the vice president of the Chilean Society for Engineering Education (SOCHEDI). He is a civil industrial engineer from the University of Chile and a PhD in higher education from the University of Michigan.

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