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### **Future School Counselors' Perceptions of Challenges that Latina/o Students Face: An Exploratory Study**

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#### **Abstract**

The current study examined future school counselors' perceptions of challenges that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education. Future school counselors cited a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors regarding Latina/o students' limited access to postsecondary education. Recommendations for counselor training programs to raise trainees' awareness of systemic forces in K-12 schools and help future school counselors monitor their beliefs and attitudes toward Latina/o students are provided.

*Keywords:* school counselors, Latina/o students, systemic challenges, higher education

Latina/o students are one of the fastest growing groups in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), and this group has the lowest rate of high school completion (American Council on Education, 2012). Given the growing Latina/o population and their low level of educational attainment, research investigating factors that impede Latina/o students from pursuing higher education is invaluable (Eckenrod-Green & Culbreth, 2008; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). The purpose of the current study was to investigate how future school counselors perceive and explain challenges that Latina/o students face in the pursuit of higher education. The current study contributes to this discussion in a number of ways. First, we provide a literature review focusing on challenges that impede Latina/o students from pursuing postsecondary education. Second, we present findings from open-ended questionnaires with 20 future school counselors identifying their

perceptions of factors that adversely affect Latina/o students. Finally, we provide a discussion regarding the importance of these findings, as well as implications for practice and research.

## **Review of the Literature**

Recent attention has been given to the voices of Latina/o students regarding their experiences with high school teachers and counselors. Based on this line of research, a number of challenges have been identified, including curriculum tracking, low expectations, and minimal information about higher education (Cavazos, 2009; Immerwahr, 2003; Griffin, & Allen, 2009; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

### **Curriculum Tracking**

In high schools throughout the United States, curriculum tracking (Cavazos, 2009; Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Gandara, 1995; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Nora, 2003; Valencia, 2002) could involve discouraging Latina/o students from higher education. It is important to note that there appears to be a disturbing trend involving tracking, thereby resulting in negative effects on Latina/o students (Gandara, 1995). Vela-Gude and colleagues (2009) noted that although a Latino participant in their study wanted to enroll in challenging coursework to prepare for postsecondary education, his school counselor discouraged him. Whereas school counselors are thought to have a primary professional tenant of helping students enroll in challenging coursework in preparation for higher education (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007), some counselors underestimate Latina/o students' academic potential by subjecting them to reduced academic expectations (Malott, 2010).

### **Low Academic Expectations**

Some researchers found that Latina/o students were communicated low expectations from school personnel, such as high school counselors and teachers (Cavazos, 2009; Martinez, 2003). In one specific case, when a Latino student wanted to look for scholarships to attend college, his teacher said this would be a waste of time (Martinez, 2003). In a separate study involving Latina/o college students, Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) illustrated how non-advanced placement Latina/o students were subjected to low expectations from high school teachers. A participant shared the following experience, "My teachers would judge me on GPA and that would hurt me. 'You're not in AP. You're not in an AP class, so therefore you're not smart'" (p. 102). As further evidence of this type of occurrence, Cavazos (2009) recorded classroom observations during a student-teaching experience at a predominantly Latina/o high school. Cavazos found that many Latina/o students internalized teachers' low expectations and were given conflicting messages about higher education. When Cavazos informed students that they could pursue and succeed in higher education, many students did not believe her, thereby supporting the contention that they may not have been exposed to high academic expectations.

### **Lack of College Information**

Researchers also found that Latina/o students left high school with insufficient college information (Immerwahr, 2003; Martinez et al., 2013; Zalaquett, 2006). Immerwahr (2003) illustrated how many Latina/o high school students were misinformed about higher education, as evidenced by a student who did not receive correct information about an application deadline. Additionally, Kimura-Walsh et al. (2009) found that Latina/o high school students did not have access to college applications. A student provided the following perspective: "...for some of my friends...they wanted applications, but they were denied applications because they weren't ranked [in the top 10% in class]" (pp. 11-12). Finally, Vela-Gude et al. (2009) extended findings that some Latina/o students left high school with minimal college information. A participant provided the following comment about the effects of minimal college information:

My counselor was never there, and I honestly believe that if she would have been there, if she would have given me that information about scholarships, about college opportunities... then I would have been able to, with scholarships and everything, I think I would have been able to achieve a lot more than I eventually did. (p. 275)

Other effects of minimal college information include missing the first year of college or preventing students from considering college as an option (Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Zalaquett, 2006).

Based on research presented thus far, curriculum tracking, low expectations, and minimal college information impede Latina/o students from pursuing postsecondary education. Therefore, K-12 schools are urged to provide efficacious services for Latina/o students, including assistance from school counselors (Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Villalba et al., 2007). In order for school counselors to help Latina/o students pursue higher education, they should (a) be aware of any systemic challenges that are present in the environment that adversely affect Latina/o students and (b) better understand their potential role in reducing the achievement gap between Latina/o students and their non-minority peers (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; Stone & Hanson, 2002; Valenica & Black, 2002).

Although previous researchers uncovered impediments to Latinas'/os' post-secondary educational opportunities, most studies culled input from students regarding their perceptions (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Malott, 2010; Martinez, 2003). That is, previous researchers focused on the subjective experiences of the relevant service-recipients to provide insight into challenges that hinder Latina/o students. The current study extends this by surveying future school counselors about their perceptions of challenges faced by Latina/o students. By investigating future school counselors' perceptions of Latina/o students' challenges, we may be able to help future counselors, school counseling programs, and ultimately Latina/o students. For example, if Latina/o students are having a stereotype threat experience (Steele, 1997), then it is vital to increase our awareness of the sources of this threat. Also, if one of the sources of stereotype threat is intragroup (i.e., Latina/o students feel not much is expected of them and Latina/o school counselors implicitly or explicitly support this), only then can a valid intervention (e.g., awareness-raising during training or practice) be selected and implemented. This approach is encouraging as support exists that if an individual is

aware of the stereotype threat, then he or she is more able to overcome it (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005).

We explored the following research questions in the current study. First, to what extent are future school counselors aware of systemic challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in higher education? Second, what factors do prospective school counselors mention as influencing Latina/o students' low academic achievement? These research questions were important for several reasons. Valencia and Black (2002) discussed deficit thinking in their article regarding internalized myths that plague Latina/o students and their parents. Instead of examining systemic forces, Valencia and Black contended that educators have historically blamed Latina/o students and their parents for the underachievement of Latina/o students. As noted by Valencia and Black, "deficit thinking, an endogenous theory of school failure, 'blames the victim' rather than examining how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally" (p. 83). To this end, a non-deficit approach may involve holding the school system accountable for its role in impeding Latina/o students from higher education (Valencia & Black, 2002). Based on previous research, the second research question determined if prospective school counselors used a non-deficit approach to explain why Latina/o students do not pursue postsecondary education. We contend that how future school counselors view challenges that Latina/o students face might influence their behavior and interactions with students.

## **Method**

We selected a qualitative research design to investigate future school counselors' perceptions of challenges that Latina/o students face. Qualitative research assumes that human perception is the manner by which an individual constructs his or her reality. As is the case with Latinas'/os' perceptions of the academic domain, some subjectively constructed realities can have detrimental consequences.

### **Participants**

In order to gather the perceptions from those in the group of interest, 20 Latina/o future school counselors (i.e., 19 females) were recruited from a practicum course at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The term Latina/o is used to identify the participants in order to be consistent with previous literature (Zalaquett, 2006). The participants in the study reported plans to become school counselors in the near future. Prior to their involvement, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The current study used an open-ended questionnaire (McLeod, 2003) to examine future school counselors' perceptions regarding Latina/o students' impediments to pursuing postsecondary education. This method has shown to be successful in related research, such as uncovering counseling students' worries and concerns (Cavazos, Alvarado, Rodriguez, & Iruegas, 2009; Jordan & Kelly, 2004). Additionally, open-ended questionnaires avoid the pitfalls associated with closed-ended questionnaires, such as a limited number of response options in a closed-ended format. However, the open-ended

format does limit the size of the participant group. Since the purpose of the current study was to uncover each participant's idiosyncratic perceptions, the open-ended format is a superior fit. Moreover, due to the exploratory nature of the current study, the selected method avoids any social influences (i.e., it is anonymous; McLeod, 2003) that could pollute the data (e.g., social conformity or groupthink). The questionnaire contained an open-ended question to probe participants' thoughts regarding Latina/o students' academic achievement (or lack of), their impediments to pursuing higher education, and possible explanations.

Upon completion of the questionnaires, two research team members independently analyzed participants' responses. Initially, the reviewers used open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify each sentence as a unique meaning unit, which is similar to the data analysis method used in previous research (Cavazos et al., 2009; Jordan & Kelly, 2004). Then, each reviewer used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify common themes among participants' questionnaire responses. Subsequently, each reviewer developed a thematic hierarchy to enhance understanding of participants' responses. Finally, the reviewers held a number of meetings to discuss discrepancies between their thematic hierarchies to parsimoniously classify each theme (Johnson et al., 2008).

## **Results**

The ten most reported challenges identified by this study's participants, in order of prevalence, were lack of family support, lack of information or awareness, socioeconomic status, lack of self-motivation, low self-esteem, inability to delay gratification, pregnancy, Latina/o culture, inability to allow children to leave home for college, and marriage (Table 1 provides a list of the top ten most reported responses). Based on participants' responses, there appears to be a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that impede Latina/o students' postsecondary access. Due to space requirements, the four most common responses are elaborated upon next.

### **Lack of Family Support**

There is a growing consensus that Latina/o parents value education and provide children with support to pursue postsecondary education (Cavazos, Cavazos, Hinojosa, & Silva, 2009). In order to explain why some Latina/o students do not pursue postsecondary education, participants in the current study cited parents as not providing support, encouragement, or high expectations. According to these future school counselors, parents are one of the main reasons why Latina/o students do not pursue higher education. Lack of support involved low expectations and minimal encouragement to pursue postsecondary education. Future school counselors in the current study believe parents have an important role in helping or impeding Latina/o students' access to postsecondary education.

### **Lack of Information or Awareness**

Access to college information and resources are important factors of college preparation. Researchers found that Latina/o high school students do not have access to

**Table 1**

*Top 10 Beginning Practicum Students' Perceptions of Challenges, Percentage of Total Challenges Cited by Participants, and Sample Testimony.*

| Response Theme                                        | Total Percentage | Sample Testimony                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of family support                                | 11.32            | Low family expectations                                               |
| Lack of information                                   | 10.38            | Lack of knowledge about college opportunities                         |
| Socioeconomic status                                  | 9.43             | Financial struggle                                                    |
| Lack of motivation                                    | 7.55             | There is not an inner motivation                                      |
| Low self-esteem                                       | 7.55             | Low self-esteem                                                       |
| Inability to delay gratification                      | 4.72             | Lack of ability to delay gratification                                |
| Pregnancy                                             | 4.72             | Getting pregnant                                                      |
| Latina/o culture                                      | 4.72             | Education is not as strongly stressed as it is in other groups        |
| Inability to allow children to leave home for college | 3.77             | Parents may be reluctant to let their children leave home for college |
| Marriage                                              | 2.83             | Getting married at an early age                                       |

college information and resources (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Insufficient access to college resources may result in reduced expectations and poorly-informed choices (Immerwahr, 2003; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). According to participants in the current study, Latina/o students either lack information about college opportunities or are unaware of such opportunities. Although participants did not provide perspectives regarding reasons behind lack of information, we contend that lack of information might be due to large counselor/student ratios. When school counselors have large and unreasonable caseloads, it is difficult to provide college information and resources to all students (Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Yamamura, 2009). However, it is also possible that school counselors do not provide college information to certain students, such as those students who are not in the top 10% or AP coursework (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

### **Socioeconomic Status**

One of the most salient challenges that Latina/o students face involves finances. Latina/o families and students continue to struggle with financial hardships due to a number of individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors. In the current study, future school counselors identified money as an important challenge that impedes Latina/o students from postsecondary education. Sample comments included “financial problems,” “no money,” and “economic problems.” As indicated by participants in the current study, socioeconomic status is an important institutional factor that impedes Latina/o students’ access to postsecondary education.

### **Lack of Motivation**

Participants in the current study mentioned that Latina/o students are not motivated to pursue postsecondary education. By citing lack of motivation as a barrier to

postsecondary education, participants in the current study provided evidence of a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that impede Latina/o students' postsecondary access. Although researchers pointed out the importance of a strength-based framework in which Latina/o students have motivation and value education (Cavazos et al., 2009), it is also important to understand that *some* Latina/o students may lack motivation as well as not understand the value of postsecondary education. According to many participants in the current study, it is difficult to cite one reason to explain Latina/o students' limited access to postsecondary education. There appears to be individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that impact Latina/o students' access to postsecondary education.

## **Discussion**

The growth of the Latina/o population and the impact of challenges on Latina/o students prompted the current study to investigate future school counselors' perceptions. This study is important given the relationship among systemic challenges, low academic achievement, and lack of goal attainment. Future school counselors, all of whom self-identified as Latina/o, provided perspectives of challenges that impede Latina/o students from pursuing higher education. Based on results from the current study, there is a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education. Interestingly, particularly given its prevalence in the literature (e.g., Cavazos, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Martinez et al., 2003; Nora, 2003), these participants did not mention certain institutional factors such as curriculum tracking. Possible reasons for this include a lack of tracking in these students' lives, or their ignorance of it due to either its subtle existence or implicit acceptance. Moreover, lack of parental support was the most cited challenge mentioned by these future counselors. By attributing Latina/o students' limited access to postsecondary education to parents, these future school counselors did not hold the school system accountable for its role in impeding students from higher education (Valencia & Black, 2002). Other important findings involved individual and interpersonal factors. Although institutional factors are likely part of the explanation, participants stated that individual students and parents also have an important role and responsibility in the college-going process. In summary, there are multiple individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that impact Latina/o students' access to postsecondary education.

In order to explain why Latina/o students tend not to pursue higher education, future school counselors cited individual challenges (e.g., "they lack the motivation"), family challenges (e.g., "their parents don't care about education"), or institutional factors (e.g., lack of college information). There are several possibilities for these findings. First, it is possible that the counselor educators in the participating program have yet to develop their students' ability to self-monitor their beliefs and attitudes toward Latina/o students. Second, counselor educators in the participants' program may not prepare future school counselors to challenge oppressive practices in K-12 schools. It is possible that some prospective counselors remain unaware of systemic or institutional barriers during the first stages of their training and perhaps even after completing their program. Third, internalized oppression is a distinct and insidious possibility. That is, some prospective school counselors may have internalized oppression due to their

experiences of oppression and systemic prejudice and discrimination, thereby influencing their perceptions toward other Latinas/os. Finally, there is a strong possibility that individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors likely play a role in Latina/o students' lack of postsecondary access. In order to increase Latina/o students' postsecondary access, we must design programs and policies to impact individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors. While it is important to hold school systems and policies accountable, we also must encourage students and parents to understand their role and responsibility in college preparation and access.

### **Implications for Practice**

There are a number of implications for training and practice. First, counselor educators must increase awareness of future school counselors regarding systemic challenges faced by Latina/o students in particular and perhaps other students in general. Training programs that explicitly attend to low expectations, poor college information, and curriculum tracking that exist in schools with Latina/o students will likely positively impact this population. The efficacy of an improved understanding and awareness of systemic challenges and how these impact Latina/o students has support in the literature. Several studies (e.g., Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003) showed that thoughts of positive role models who overcame stereotype threat can decrease or abolish stereotype threat. We contend that it is imperative for future and current school counselors to learn and understand how systemic challenges function to negatively influence Latina/o students.

There also were a number of future school counselors who, rather than citing parents, placed most of the responsibility on the school system for not providing Latina/o students with information in addressing the pursuit of higher education and its benefits. Future school counselors who are mentored to focus on systemic or institutional forces contributing to the achievement gap between Latina/o and Anglo students, and the salient factors affecting Latina/o students' academic success, might be more effective practitioners. As one example, a school counselor who believes a Latino student's failure is due to personal (i.e., no motivation), parental (i.e., no support at home), or cultural reasons may interact with this student differently compared with a school counselor who cites systemic challenges. It is also important that prospective counselors develop an understanding of (a) their perceptions of what is involved in academic resilience, as well as (b) those intrapersonal factors (e.g., the self-fulfilling prophecy; Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005) that play a role in the achievement gap. Previous researchers found that successful Latina/o students have high self-efficacy (Cavazos et al., 2010), strong work ethic (Morales, 2008), and proactive coping abilities (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Furthermore, Seligman (2006) contended that in addition to aptitude and motivation, having an optimistic explanatory style is important in a number of settings, such as work, school, and sports. Noteworthy was that not one future school counselor mentioned pessimism or a negative explanatory style as a reason that impedes students from pursuing higher education. Finally, we encourage prospective and current school counselors to understand the complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors on Latina/o students' postsecondary preparation, access, persistence, and completion. Counselor educators must train school counselors using an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) in order to help school counselors understand how

individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors impact Latina/o students. As one example, while it is important to impact institutional policies such as access to college information or AP coursework, it is also important to help Latina/o students increase motivation and self-efficacy (individual factors) as well as help Latina/o parents develop college knowledge (interpersonal factors).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are a number of directions for research. First, because some Latina/o students have experienced insufficient services or low expectations from high school counselors (Malott, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009), research must continue to uncover counselors' beliefs about Latina/o students in an effort to better understand the genesis of students' perceptions. This line of research could provide greater insight into factors that prevent Latina/o students from receiving quality advisement, high expectations, and college information. Another fruitful area of investigation involves personal interviews or focus groups with prospective and current school counselors. Qualitative investigations will allow researchers to ask follow-up questions addressing the challenges that emerged in the current study. Also, future research that culls input from practicing school counselors regarding their perceptions of challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in college could be invaluable. Finally, it is important for researchers to examine the effectiveness of training programs to increase school counselors' knowledge and understanding of individual, interpersonal, and institutional challenges.

### **Limitations of Study**

Given the small number of participants in the current study, generalizability is limited. Additionally, participants were recruited from a practicum course in a non-CACREP counselor education program. Students in other classes (e.g., first class in a counseling program; Introduction to Guidance and Counseling) or those enrolled in a CACREP program may differ from those who participated in the current study. Another limitation involves the method that was employed in the current study. That is, a focus group or personal interviews would have provided these future school counselors with a greater opportunity to elaborate on their responses. Finally, there was only one male participant in the current study, thereby providing insufficient data to examine possible gender differences.

### **Conclusion**

Most research addressing Latina/o students' academic challenges involved the students themselves. Tracking, low expectations, and lack of college information were identified as primary challenges that impede the academic progress of this important demographic group. This study utilized an open-ended questionnaire with future school counselors to discover perceptions of challenges that Latina/o students face in pursuit of postsecondary education. We recommend that future school counselors understand how individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors impact Latina/o students' postsecondary access.

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