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The Role of School Counselors to Help Teachers Understand Challenges That Impede Latina/o Students from Higher Education

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Abstract

Twenty-seven prospective teachers provided perspectives regarding challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in higher education. The results indicate that while some prospective teachers mentioned the school system, other teachers mentioned Latina/o students and their parents. Implications for school counselors to help prospective and current teachers understand challenges that Latina/o students face are provided.

Keywords: Latina/o students, teacher education, school counselors

Latina/o students have the highest high school dropout rates in the United States (American Council on Education, 2008). It is also well documented that Latina/o students have lower levels of educational attainment compared with other ethnic groups (American Council on Education, 2012). Compared with 51% of Asians and 34.5% of Whites, only 14.5% of Latinos over 25 had a bachelor's degree in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2013). As noted by Quijada and Alvarez (2006), "The educational and

psychological literatures continue to use culturally deficit frameworks to examine and reform Latina/o achievement, blaming Latina/o cultures, languages, and parents and students themselves” (p. 14). Based on Quijada and Alvarez’s contention that Latina/o students and parents are relegated to a culturally deficit framework, it is important that prospective and current teachers view Latina/o students from a strength-based perspective and take responsibility for their role in reducing the achievement gap. However, teachers may have minimal exposure to multicultural training or culturally-responsive teaching practices (Dickson, Zamora, Gonzalez, Chun, & Callaghan-Leon, 2011). Given the lack of multicultural training for prospective teachers, it is important to understand how prospective teachers explain Latina/o students’ low academic achievement rates. The main purpose of the current study is to contribute to the discussion regarding increasing Latino enrollment rates in postsecondary education. We contend that school counselors can use the American School Counselor Association National Model (ASCA, 2012) to train prospective and current teachers to understand how challenges impact Latina/o students (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007).

In this article, we provide a literature review that focuses on institutional challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in postsecondary education. Second, findings from surveys with 27 prospective teachers are presented. Finally, a discussion regarding the importance of these findings is provided, and recommendations for school counselors are provided.

Literature Review

In a personal narrative of an administrator at a school with Latina/o students, House (2005) provided the following comment about a Latina student who did not receive a scholarship: “The school had not prepared that child for a higher level of education. The system had failed her—as it fails millions like her” (p. 10). The current article also takes an institutional perspective and identifies curriculum tracking (Cavazos, 2009), low expectations from teachers (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Martinez, 2003), and (c) minimal guidance (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009) as challenges that impede Latina/o students from succeeding in high school, college, and beyond. We also highlight the importance of a strength-based approach to understand Latina/o students’ educational experiences.

Strength-Based Approach

An important question that must be addressed when looking at factors that contribute to low academic completion rates among Latina/o students is, “Who is responsible for these rates?” According to researchers, educators and researchers traditionally placed educational underachievement on Latina/o students, families, or culture (Valencia, 2002). There are a number of problems with this perspective. First, by blaming Latina/o students, parents, or culture, important stakeholders such as teachers and counselors remove responsibility they have in helping this population become academically successful (Garza & Garza, 2010). Second, by blaming individual, family, or cultural factors, important stakeholders do not hold the educational system accountable as sources of problems for Latina/o students (Valencia & Black, 2002). Researchers discussed or found deficit thinking among educators in studies with students from low-

income backgrounds or of color (Delpit, 1995; Garza & Garza, 2010; Scheurich, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). Valencia and Black (2002) described deficit thinking as “the idea that students, particularly of low-SES background and of color, fail in school because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process” (p. 83). Valencia and Black also noted that when educators and other individuals blame students or parents, they “blame the victim” compared with identifying systemic forces that impede students from doing well in school. These researchers encouraged educators and researchers to operate from a non-deficit approach, in which Mexican Americans and their parents are believed to value education (Cavazos, Cavazos, Hinojosa, & Silva, 2009).

In order to help Latina/o students overcome challenges to higher education, we contend that Latina/o students and their parents should be viewed from a strength-based perspective. This perspective includes (a) valuing Latina/o students’ culture and family (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; Zalaquett, Alvarez McHatton, & Cranston-Gingras, 2007), (b) valuing what students bring to the classroom, (c) not blaming students or families for low academic achievement (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006), (d) not lowering academic standards and objectives (Vela-Gude et al., 2009), and (e) holding high expectations (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003; Zalaquett, 2005). A number of researchers recommend that high school teachers and counselors use a strength-based perspective to work with Latina/o students and families (Cavazos, Holt, & Flamez, 2012; Valencia, 2002). Consistent with a strength-based approach, we identified curriculum tracking, lack of guidance, and low expectations as institutional factors that negatively impact Latina/o students and families.

Curriculum Tracking

Curriculum tracking is based on students’ perceived ability levels (Valencia, 2002) and involves discouraging Latina/o students from higher education (Cavazos, 2009; Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Gandara, 1995). In a study of 50 Latinas/os who attained degrees beyond the bachelor level, Gandara (1995) highlighted the distinction between the college-preparatory track and non-college-preparatory track. In addition to dividing friendships, tracking implied to students in the non-college preparatory track that school counselors and teachers held low expectations of them. Additionally, Conchas (2001) found that tracking impeded Latina/o students from pursuing higher education. The students in general academic tracks were subjected to low expectations and lack of support from counselors, which often resulted in pessimism regarding future educational experiences. Further, in a recent study with Latina/o college students, Vela-Gude et al. (2009) concluded that students were discouraged from participating in challenging coursework (i.e., AP courses), thus illustrating that tracking is still used to “push” Latina/o high school students away from higher education.

Low Expectations

Perhaps as a result of placement in a non-college preparatory track, Latina/o students were exposed to statements alluding to low expectations from counselors and teachers. Martinez (2003) found that Latina/o college students were exposed to low expectations, as evident by the following student’s perspective: “My guidance counselor, for example, felt very strongly that I should not attend any 4-year institution for that

matter...” (p. 110). Additionally, Vela-Gude et al. (2009) highlighted that Latina/o college students were exposed to low expectations from high school counselors. A Latino student wanted to enroll in coursework to prepare for higher education but was informed by his school counselor that this was a “bad idea.” Additionally, Thompson (2008) investigated the experiences of Latino and African American high school students that prevented them from doing well in school. Thompson found that many Latino students reported low academic expectations. While 64% of Latino students expressed interest in pursuing higher education, only 39% of teachers in this study stated that most students should have college-preparatory coursework (Thompson, 2008). This study provided evidence of differences between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of potential to pursue higher education. In summary, researchers found that low expectations can result in (a) lower self-esteem, (b) internalization of educational failure, or (c) self-doubt (Cavazos, 2009; Martinez, 2003).

Lack of Guidance

Another challenge that impedes Latina/o students from pursuing higher education involves lack of guidance from teachers and counselors (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Immerwahr, 2003; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Immerwahr (2003) illustrated that high school teachers were overwhelmed with a plethora of responsibilities, thereby leaving them with little time and energy to mentor and provide sufficient guidance to Latina/o students. In addition, Vela-Gude et al. (2009) found that Latina/o students were not given sufficient attention from high school counselors. Many participants from this study indicated that their school counselors “were never there” to provide quality attention, advisement, or mentoring. Finally, Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) concluded that Latina/o students perceived teachers as unsupportive of their educational goals, as indicated by a participant who offered the following perspective:

In terms of the teachers, I didn’t really get the support that I wanted because again I was not in AP... The motivation wasn’t there. I was treated like any ordinary student. But I did see how they treated other students. They treated them very well. They gave them letters of recommendation without even asking, but I had to ask for mine... (p. 45)

In the aforementioned narrative, this student perceived low expectations and lack of support from high school teachers based on academic placement. It is important to note that his teachers were wrong about his academic potential as he graduated with honors from a 4-year university (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010).

Curriculum tracking, low expectations, and minimal guidance from teachers and counselors have been cited as institutional reasons that impede Latina/o students from continuing their education after high school. Although researchers uncovered challenges to higher education by culling input from Latina/o students (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; Zalaquett, 2005) and prospective school counselors (Vela, Lu, Veliz, Johnson, & Castro, 2014), less attention has been given to the perspectives of prospective teachers. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to survey prospective teachers about perceptions of Latina/o students’ barriers. This study is important because “many scholars have noted that teachers may have had limited exposure to multicultural training or experiences designed to increase cultural responsiveness” (Dickson et al., 2011, p. 10). Based on previous research, we explored the following research questions in the current

study: (a) Do prospective teachers emphasize institutional or individual reasons to explain why Latina/o students fail to pursue higher education? (b) Do prospective teachers use a culturally deficit approach (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; Valencia & Black, 2002) when explaining the low academic achievement rates among Latina/o students?

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven prospective teachers (i.e., 26 females and 1 male) were recruited from a teaching internship course at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the southwestern United States. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to participant recruitment and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 37. Each participant self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican-American, Chicano, or Latina/o. The term Latina/o is used to describe participants, which is consistent with previous literature (Zalaquett, 2005). All participants were enrolled in a teaching internship class and did not have classroom experience. Given that a few studies (e.g., Marx, 2008) examined current teachers' perceptions of Latina/o students, it was important to address pre-service teachers in this study. The perceptions of this novice group of educators might be different from that of experienced teachers with years of classroom experience. We chose this sample for the current study to take the novel approach of learning about pre-service teachers' perceptions of barriers that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education. Once we determine pre-service teachers' perceptions of specific barriers, future research can explore what influences such perceptions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The current study used a qualitative approach with an open-ended questionnaire (Cavazos, Alvarado, Rodriguez, & Iruegas, 2009; McLeod, 2003) to examine factors that impede Latina/o students from pursuing higher education. This method was utilized for several reasons. First, this method allows participants to respond in an anonymous manner (McLeod, 2003) compared with face-to-face interviews. This was important given the sensitive nature of the research question. Second, an open-ended questionnaire has been used to uncover counseling students' worries and concerns (Cavazos et al., 2009; Jordan & Kelly, 2004), thus illustrating the effectiveness of this method of data collection. Participants were provided a demographic sheet and questionnaire with the following stimulus question, "What do you think prevents Latina/o students from continuing with their education after high school (i.e., going to college)?" This study and data differ from a quantitative study by allowing participants to respond to an open-ended question in a narrative format. Most quantitative studies use closed-ended, Likert-scale questions and instruments with evidence of strong reliability. In the current study, we allowed participants to respond in a narrative format to capture their qualitative perceptions.

The lead author analyzed responses and identified common themes. Data analysis proceeded as follows. First, the lead author used open-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify sentences that had specific meaning units. Similar to a previous study (Cavazos et al., 2009), each participant's perception of a challenge was considered a specific

meaning unit. The lead author, who has experience in qualitative journal writing, analysis of personal interviews, and background in grounded theory methodology, analyzed responses and identified common themes. This approach is consistent with previous researchers (Cavazos et al., 2009; Vela et al., 2014) who mentioned that a trained principal investigator is justified in facilitating data analysis. Second, the lead author used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to compare and contrast themes from one transcript with themes from subsequent transcripts. Third, he created a thematic hierarchy. At this point, 19 themes emerged from data analysis. Although some themes could have been combined, it was important to provide each response with appropriate identification and meaning assignment (Jordan & Kelly, 2004). Finally, he asked a second reviewer to analyze and verify emergent themes. The initial and second reviewer did not agree on all categories and themes. In cases where discrepancies were evident, multiple conversations were held to reach an agreement for each specific theme. Meetings focused on discrepancies in a meaning unit's assignment to a specific category as well as differences in identification of meaning units. We implemented these steps to prevent confirmatory bias and simplistic data interpretation (Johnson et al., 2008).

Results

Institutional Factors

Factors that emerged within the institutional category include comments from participants identifying several factors that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education. These factors include lack of information about higher education and lack of support or low expectations from school personnel.

Lack of information about higher education. Participants mentioned lack of information as a challenge that Latina/o students face. For example, a participant provided her perspective, "Another factor might be the lack of knowing what to do, where to go, who to speak to in order to attend college." And finally, a Latina student-teacher said, "They are not given enough information in high school."

Lack of support or low expectations from school personnel. Participants also cited lack of support or low expectations as reasons preventing Latina/o students from enrolling in postsecondary education. A participant shared, "The high schools are not gearing most of the students to attend college, only a select few." Another participant also mentioned the school system when she said, "I believe the education system that they attend does not fully teach them the importance of a higher education."

Individual Factors

Factors that emerged within the individual category include comments from participants identifying their perspectives that some students do not have positive attitudes to achieve academic success. These factors include attitudes toward education, money, and postsecondary education.

Students do not care about education. While some participants blamed the school system for exposing Latina/o students to low expectations, other participants blamed students. A participant stated, "Some students have no interest in studying," and another participant provided a similar comment, "It's a low expectation level for themselves."

Students want to work to earn money. Many participants believe Latina/o students want to work instead of attending college. The following comments illustrate this concept: “They want to work instead of going to college to get money,” “Maybe they prefer to work instead of coming to college,” and “Others might find very good paying jobs at places such as the oil refineries, which don’t require a college degree.”

Students choose to attend college. Some participants mentioned the school system as not providing Latina/o students with information about higher education, which forces Latina/o students to make poorly informed choices (Immerwahr, 2003). However, the following comment illustrates the belief that Latina/o students *do not* choose to attend college: “I think it’s an individual and motivational factor, because we choose whether to attend college or not.”

Family Factors

Factors that emerged within the family category include comments from participants identifying their perspectives that some students lack family environments conducive for postsecondary education. These factors include pregnancy, employment to help family, and lack of support.

Starting a family at an early age. Participants contend that Latina/o students want to attend college but they may have to forgo plans in order to provide for families. A participant stated, “Get pregnant and become parents.” Another participant also mentioned pregnancy in the Latina/o community with the following, “The second factor is that some Hispanic young adults start their families at a very young age, at least here. We see kids having babies.”

Working to help family. Many participants contend that Latina/o students feel like they have to work to support their family. A participant shared, “A lot of Hispanics feel they have to begin working and support either their family, or begin a family. So, they choose to settle for a job and don’t continue their education because of this.” Another participant also mentioned family when she said, “[Latina/o students] need to start working to help their family.”

Lack of parental support. Some participants cited parents as not providing support to help their children pursue higher education. One participant shared, “It may be that their parents do not motivate their children...,” and another participant provided the following perspective: “No encouragement from parents.” Finally, one participant stated that Latina/o parents not only discourage their children from attending college but also provide low expectations. She commented, “Parents belittle the students into making them believe college isn’t for them. They are meant for hard work.”

Discussion

The current study surveyed prospective teachers to examine perceptions of challenges that impede Latina/o students from enrolling in postsecondary education. The main purpose of the current study was to contribute to a discussion regarding ways to increase Latino student enrollment in institutions of higher education. A number of important findings emerged. First, as illustrated in comments from participants in the current study, there appears to be a plethora of factors involved in the low academic achievement rates among Latina/o students. Participants cited a complex interplay among

individual, institutional, and family factors that hinder Latina/o students from pursuing higher education. This finding is consistent with prospective school counselors' perceptions of barriers that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education (Vela et al., 2014). Second, eight prospective teachers mentioned parents and/or students themselves as challenges. Participants used a culturally deficit approach (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; Valencia, 2002) in explaining Latina/o students' low academic achievement. It is highly possible that these participants' explanations might influence their behavior and practice with Latina/o students. Also, many participants did not report responses with certainty. That is, it appeared that they were unsure of their responses, as evidenced by a participant who said, "Perhaps some students might not..." and another participant who began her response with, "Another reason could be..." Based on this study's findings, participants may not have had exposure to specific information in their teacher education program with regard to institutional, individual, or family factors that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education.

Most challenges that were found in the current study could be classified into three categories: institutional, individual, or family. Although these participants were trained within the same teacher education program, differences regarding the perception of challenges clearly exist. There are several possibilities for this finding. First, it is possible that prospective teachers believe that *some* Latina/o students do not have the motivation or self-drive to pursue higher education. Researchers illustrated that teachers believe some Latina/o students do not have the ability to succeed in higher education (Cavazos, 2009; Martinez, 2003; Marx, 2008; Warren, 2002; Zalaquett, 2005), and it is possible that some participants from the current study have been influenced with similar deficit views of Latina/o students. Second, it could be that teacher education programs do not enhance their students' ability to monitor their beliefs and attitudes, thereby preventing them from understanding their potential influence with Latina/o students. This appears likely given that some teachers have limited exposure to multicultural training or experiences to increase culturally-responsive teaching (Dickson et al., 2011). Third, teacher education programs may not prepare prospective teachers to challenge oppressive practices in K-12 schools. In fact, it is important to note that not one participant from the current study specifically mentioned *curriculum tracking* as a reason that Latina/o students refrain from pursuing higher education. This finding is puzzling given documented effects of tracking on the hopes and dreams of Latina/o students (Cavazos, 2009; Gandara, 1995; Herrera, 2003).

Implications for Practice

Based on this study's findings, there are a number of implications for school counselors to increase Latino student enrollment in postsecondary education. High school counselors are encouraged to use the Multicultural Competencies (Arredondo et al., 1996) and American School Counseling Association's National Model (2012) to help prospective and current teachers provide culturally-responsive services to Latina/o students. We contend that school counselors and teachers who practice within a strength-based perspective and culturally-sensitive framework can increase Latino enrollment at institutions of higher education. First, high school counselors are encouraged to help teachers develop knowledge of the Latina/o population. High school teachers must understand how institutional factors (e.g., tracking and lack of college information)

function to prevent Latina/o students from postsecondary education (Cavazos, 2009; Malott, 2010). School counselors can facilitate psycho-educational presentations on cultural expectations, acculturation, *familiasmo*, and generation status to help teachers learn about the Latina/o culture. High school teachers also can incorporate information about career and college into curriculum in order to provide Latina/o students with greater access to information (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998). Berrios-Allison (2011) examined the impact of a career support group for Latina/o college students. In addition to a sense of connection with students, this support group helped Latina/o college students develop social responsibility and improve overall retention rates.

School counselors can help prospective and current teachers develop skills to work with Latina/o students, as well as identify positive beliefs about Latina/o students, parents, and culture. To this end, school counselors can help teachers use a strength-based approach and value different aspects of the Latina/o culture, such as language practices (Arredondo et al., 1996), family practices (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006), cultural beliefs (Fuentes, 2006), and ethnic identity (Zamarripa, Lane, Lerma, & Holin, 2011). Additionally, professional counselors can facilitate teacher-groups to facilitate exploration of values, biases, and attitudes toward Latina/o students and families. High school teachers need to have a safe place to process values and beliefs of Latina/o students and families. Although prospective and current teachers can individually work on attitudes and ability to motivate students to pursue postsecondary education, responsibility ultimately lies with institutional forces such as the school district, school culture, and the counseling department. Part of the ASCA National Model (2012) involves school/community collaboration and the implementation of an advisory committee. Based on findings from the current study, an advisory committee with teachers, counselors, parents, students, families, and community leaders could discuss systemic barriers to Latina/o students' pursuit of postsecondary education. Such conversations could help increase Latino enrollment rates in postsecondary education by helping multiple stakeholders understand challenges that impede Latina/o students' access to postsecondary education. An advisory committee could also identify interdisciplinary interventions to help Latina/o students become resilient and develop strategies to improve Latina/o students' career development and readiness (ASCA, 2012).

Finally, parental involvement workshops can (a) address parents' stereotypes about higher education, (b) teach parenting skills to help with college and career decisions, and (c) help parents gain information about career and college readiness. These psycho-educational sessions can help Latina/o families understand the importance of career and college readiness (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Once parents have an increased understanding of college and career knowledge (Ali & Saunders, 2006), including work study, scholarships, career opportunities, and special transition programs, they will be comfortable with financial and family challenges mentioned by participants in the current study. In summary, school counselors can provide presentations to teachers to increase their knowledge, awareness, and skills about the Latina/o population. School counselors also can work directly with Latina/o students to increase enrollment rates in postsecondary education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study's findings, there is a need for research in several areas. First, researchers should explore different reasons that were used to explain Latina/o students' underachievement. This would include an examination of the institutional, individual, and family factors that were cited as challenges to enrollment in postsecondary education. Another fruitful area of research involves the extent to which teacher preparation programs integrate multicultural training into coursework and pedagogy to work with Latina/o students. Such studies would not only need to investigate prospective and current teachers' perceptions of barriers, but also their ability to help Latina/o students overcome barriers to higher education. This line of research will provide important insight into how teacher education can influence and prepare prospective teachers to remove individual, institutional, and family barriers that prevent Latina/o students from postsecondary education. Finally, outcome-based research can examine the impact of psycho-educational workshops and trainings on prospective teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and skills to work with Latina/o students.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, prospective teachers were trained at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with a 90% Hispanic surrounding population. Results might not be representative of teachers who work in other settings (e.g., schools where Latina/o students are the ethnic minority). Second, true triangulation was not achieved in this study. Personal interviews with current teachers, parents, and/or students would have supplemented findings from an open-ended questionnaire. Third, this study investigated prospective teachers' perceptions of challenges that hinder Latina/o students from postsecondary education. We did not address these future teachers' actual effectiveness or skills when working with Latina/o students. Participants also were enrolled in a teaching internship class and did not have classroom experience. Finally, we used one, open-ended question to explore the domain of interest. This approach did not allow researchers to ask follow-up or in-depth questions to explore emergent themes.

Conclusion

Findings from the current study suggest that prospective teachers identify three main reasons to explain Latina/o students' low academic achievement: institutional, individual, and family. There are those who believe that external structures (e.g., institutional factors) and authorities are responsible for the failure of individuals to succeed, and there are those who believe that individuals (e.g., students and families) should be responsible for negotiating the limitations inherent in all institutions and structures. Based on this study's findings, Latina/o students face two sources of undermining messages in their school environment: (a) educational authorities who perpetuate beliefs and stereotypes that effectively marginalize Latina/o students, and (b) educational authorities who fail to provide all Latina/o students with college information and support. Given the influence of these external sources of undermining beliefs, the burden of responsibility for change should perhaps fall disproportionately upon those

who are in the position of rectifying a longstanding inequity in the school system. Therefore, we contend that school counselors should endeavor to train teachers to attribute the failure of Latina/o students to the school system (Valencia, 2002), rather than laying the bulk of responsibility on students and their families.

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