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Understanding Perceived Differences Between Successful and Struggling First-Year Mexican American College Students: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In this exploratory study, we conducted in-depth interviews with university seminar instructors to discover perceived differences between successful and struggling first-year Latina/o college students. Several factors emerged from interviews to differentiate successful and struggling Latina/o college students. These factors include assimilation, motivation to pursue goals, family knowledge and resources, family social class, different preparation for postsecondary education, and different levels of support and encouragement in high school. We provide recommendations for high school counselors and researchers.

Keywords: Mexican American students, school counselors

Increased interest has been given to academic performance among Mexican American students (Zalaquett, 2006) given that Mexican American students are underrepresented in higher education (Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Pina-Watson, 2014). Compared with 30.3% among White Americans, only 10.6% of Mexican Americans received a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Some researchers have

investigated personal and social factors of successful Mexican American college students, providing evidence of an interplay among resiliency, coping responses, and social support that help students become academically successful. However, minimal attention has been given to differences between successful and struggling first-year Mexican American college students. Given the growing Mexican American population and their low college completion rates compared with other ethnic groups (American Council on Education, 2008), the purpose of this exploratory study is to provide insight into perceived factors that might differentiate successful and struggling first-year Latina/o college students. The results from this exploratory study could have important implications for high school counselors who want to help Mexican American students transition to postsecondary education.

Literature Review

Individual factors that help Latina/o students succeed in higher education include resiliency, self-efficacy, and self-determination (Cavazos et al., 2010; Zalaquett, 2006). Resiliency is defined as “the ability to cope with adversity and overcome the most challenging circumstances” (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005, p. 319). Individual factors that comprise resiliency include goal setting, intrinsic motivation, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Researchers found that successful Latina/o college students use planned action, self-reflection, positive reframing, goal setting, and acceptance, as coping and resilient responses to overcome personal and academic challenges (Cavazos et al., 2010; Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009). Zalaquett (2006) found that sense of accomplishment, responsibility toward others, and value of education helped students succeed in higher education. Many participants understood education was important to their personal and academic futures.

In addition to individual factors, the presence of mentoring (Zalaquett, 2006) and family support (Cavazos et al., 2010) has been found to consistently predict Mexican American students’ success. Mentoring refers to a relationship between a skilled individual and a less skilled individual to provide support toward personal and professional development (Black, Suarez, & Medina, 2004). Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) analyzed stories of 13 successful Latina/o college students to explore the role of mentoring in their academic careers. Their findings indicate that mentors have a positive impact on students, as indicated in the following example, “I was blessed to actually have some teachers that were really good. They got to know me and they took a genuine interest in me. They gave me advice and encouraged me not to settle” (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006, p. 346). Additionally, Cavazos et al. (2010) illustrated that unconditional support and encouragement were important to the academic success of Latina/o college students. The aforementioned findings point to the importance of mentoring and family support on Latina/o students’ academic success.

Culture also plays an important role in the development of resiliency and academic achievement among Latina/o students (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). Two important factors include enculturation and acculturation. Acculturation refers to the degree to which individuals adhere to the dominant culture, while enculturation relates to the degree to which individuals adhere to the Mexican culture (Aguayo, Herman, Ojeda, & Flores, 2010). Some researchers found that orientation to the Anglo culture was related

to Latina/o students' academic success, academic goals, and career self-efficacy (Flores, Ojeda, Huang, Gee, & Lee, 2006; Lopez, Ehly, & Garcia-Vasquez, 2002; Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumberg, & Ponterotto, 2007). However, it is important to note that other researchers highlighted how enculturation to the Mexican culture contributed to Latina/o students' enrollment in AP coursework (Cavazos Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2014) and college self-efficacy (Aguayo et al., 2011). Although there are mixed findings regarding the importance of acculturation and/or enculturation, we agree with other researchers who speculate that students should be given opportunities to learn about their Mexican culture (Zamarripa, Lane, Lerma, & Holin, 2011).

Successful Mexican American students have resilient characteristics, positive coping responses, support from family and mentors, and adherence to the dominant culture. However, most researchers relied on self-awareness and recollection by successful Mexican American college students regarding those characteristics and conditions that helped them succeed (Cavazos et al., 2010). There is a gap in the analyses performed thus far as no literature exists investigating faculty's perceptions of differences between successful and struggling Mexican American students. In order to fill this gap in the literature, we used a phenomenological approach to understand perceived differences between successful and struggling Mexican American college students. Based on previous research, we explored the following research question: what are perceived differences between successful and less successful Latina/o college students from the perspectives of first-year seminar instructors?

Methods

In this exploratory study, we utilized a phenomenological approach to discover the experiences and perspectives of a specific group of individuals. A qualitative approach was selected to learn from university seminar instructors' experiences and perspectives of working with successful and struggling Mexican American college students. We selected this approach to provide insight into a particular phenomenon and understand the meaning participants assign to this phenomena (Maxwell & Henriksen, 2012).

Participants

We used purposeful sampling procedures (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) to recruit seven seminar instructors with experience working with Mexican American students. We used purposeful sampling to make sure participants had experience as seminar instructors working with first-year Mexican American students. All instructors worked at a single Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI; institution where Latinas/os represent at least 25% of the population) in the southwestern United States. To recruit participants, the lead author invited several instructors to participate based on a previous working relationship. Initial participants recommended other seminar instructors, thereby creating a snowball sampling strategy (Gay et al., 2012). The lead author obtained Institutional Review Board approval, and participants provided informed consent.

All participants had at least a bachelor's degree at the time of data collection. Two participants had a master's degree (i.e., Psychology and English), one participant had a PhD in Counselor Education, and two participants were pursuing master's degrees (i.e.,

History and English). Participants self-identified as Mexican American, White, Hispanic, or Tejana. All participants taught a university seminar course in a first-year program at a university in the southwestern United States. The purpose of this seminar course is to help college freshmen make a successful transition from high school to college. All seminar instructors interact with students in learning community coursework (e.g., history, composition, and first-year seminar). Each seminar instructor is responsible for facilitating discussions in seminar, attending the large lecture course, and grading papers in the large lecture course. In the first-year seminar course, common assignments or class discussions focus on goal setting, motivation, high school experiences, family background, and college success. Students are required to submit reflection papers and portfolios, providing instructors with opportunities to learn about students' high school experiences, goals, and academic performance. Due to the course structure and interaction between seminar instructors and students across multiple courses, these participants are likely able to provide important insight and perceptions about Mexican American students' academic performance and transition to higher education.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews were conducted with seminar instructors and initiated with the following main question, "Based on your experiences in the classroom, what are the differences, if any, between your successful and struggling Mexican American college students?" Successful students were defined as students with high course grades in history, composition, and first-year seminar. Struggling Mexican American students were defined as those who dropped coursework or were performing poorly (e.g., failing or below C average) in coursework. Follow-up questions focused on goal setting, motivation, high school experiences, family background, and college success. The lead author conducted all interviews, and each interview lasted between 25 and 50 minutes. Additionally, the research team used two coding cycles to determine common themes. First, three research team members used initial coding (Saldana, 2009) to identify sentences in each interview transcript that had specific meaning. Second, we used pattern coding (Saldana, 2009) to identify specific themes based on meaningful sentences during initial coding. Finally, a consensus among researchers was reached regarding emergent themes.

Trustworthiness

Confirmability and dependability are two important components of trustworthiness (Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Morrow, 2005). Confirmability involves examining researchers' biases and assumptions and the resultant effects on data analysis (Malott, Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010). Researchers were encouraged to reflect on personal biases and assumptions (if any) when interpreting and analyzing data. The lead author's experience as a Mexican American researcher and former seminar instructor influenced the purpose of this study. He was cognizant of these values and took necessary precautions to ensure bias did not interfere with the research process. Second, dependability refers to consistency of results among multiple researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the researcher is considered an instrument in qualitative research (Gay et al., 2012). In order to reduce subjectivity, the lead researcher discussed his values and biases with research team members. He did not want his background as a Mexican

American male and his motivation to conduct research on Latina/o college students' success to influence interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2009).

Results

Discoveries from this exploratory study are presented within the following themes that emerged during data analysis: assimilation, motivation to pursue goals, family knowledge and resources, family social class, different preparation for postsecondary education, and different levels of support and encouragement in high school. We used seminar instructors' statements and stories to highlight beliefs about factors that might differentiate successful and struggling Latina/o students.

Assimilation

Many participants indicated that assimilation helped Mexican American students become academically successful. Perceptions about assimilation and culture were derived from course assignments, reflection papers, and class discussions. Participants speculated that successful Mexican American college students were more likely to assimilate to the dominant American culture. Jody reported, "in academia, I've had someone tell me, 'it's gringolandia.' So you have to fit in with that group . . . so you can navigate your way through academia. I think successful students are more willing to change." Jody provided a similar perspective with the following story:

And I remember a couple of students, about two years ago, that if you weren't the right kind of Hispanic, then you weren't encouraged to go to college. I remember I asked this kid, "What do you mean the right kind?" He said, "you know what I'm talking about Miss. The Hispanics that act White."

Motivation to Pursue Goals

Several participants speculated that motivation to pursue goals might differentiate successful Mexican American students from struggling students. Perceptions about motivation to pursue goals were based on class observations as well as portfolio assignments regarding educational and career goals. Identifying goals provided students with reasons to attend college and motivation to work hard. Leslie shared,

I've noticed that students who do better are the ones who talk about goals, what they want to do, and why they're in school. They have particular goals that they want to reach compared with other students who don't do as well.

Terry also mentioned goals with the following comment,

And just the biggest thing I have seen is when they know what they're here for; they do better because they have that goal that they want to reach. By the time they get out of school, they want to land a job somewhere or they want to get into the next school.

Terry also mentioned motivation with the following comment about a successful Mexican American student: "You can tell she is highly motivated because she has done well before, she has high standards for herself as opposed to other students who have never done very well. . ." In other words, this student's prior academic success

contributed to her confidence and intrinsic motivation (i.e., self-efficacy). Finally, Maria said struggling students do not have long-term goals. She shared,

Some students don't look into the future and they are just focusing on the right now [present], which hurts because in terms of getting good grades in the end, they're not really thinking about that; they are thinking about what they're going to do today.

Family Knowledge and Resources

Participants provided perspectives that successful Mexican American college students received college knowledge from educated parents. College knowledge refers to information regarding steps to apply, enroll, and navigate postsecondary education. Most perceptions of family knowledge and resources were derived from course assignments or class discussions about family. Perceptions of college knowledge included knowing what questions to ask, what courses to take, and how to communicate with professors. According to these participants, successful Mexican American students had parents with college knowledge, thereby contributing to their success in postsecondary education. Maria provided the following comment:

A parent with an education, not always, but likely will know what the student is going through, and they know what questions to ask; they know what to tell their kid, 'you need to get to know your professors and start your papers early.'

Lucy also provided the following comment about parents with college knowledge:

One thing I've noticed over the years, or it's becoming a trend with a lot of the first-generation students more to this area or some other areas, they struggle initially getting used to the collegiate environment, and they don't have anybody around them to talk to about it because no one has gone through that experience that they are going through.

Family Social Class

Several participants mentioned social class as a possible difference between successful and struggling Mexican American students. Perceptions about family social class were based on class discussions and course assignments focused on the role of family support. Families within the same social class (e.g., no college education) can have different knowledge levels. Some families of low "social class" may be very supportive and knowledgeable about the college-going process. Others in the same social class may feel that since they did not attend college, there is no reason that their child should pursue postsecondary education. Participants commented that successful Mexican American college students were from a higher social class. Jody shared the following perspective regarding successful students: "Those students probably had parents who had a college education, they had good paying jobs, they were of a different social class." Terry also shared a similar perspective: "I think there are issues of economic class when a student is from a lower economic family..." Additionally, Jody provided a succinct account of the effects of living in a lower SES family:

A lot of my students that tend to struggle are those from a lower class, but they want that education. They have had instilled in them to get an education, that's

what's valuable. But at the same time, they value their education, but they don't really know why they're doing it.

Different Preparation for Postsecondary Education

Almost all participants offered perspectives that different high school experiences might have resulted in insufficient preparation to succeed in higher education. Perceptions about different preparation for postsecondary education were based on course assignments and discussions about high school. Many participants shared stories of students who had negative high school experiences. Wilma shared,

I know Jenny was an AP student and not that students who don't take AP aren't capable of doing the same work, I just think that having that class before coming to college is super helpful and prepares you a little bit.

Lucy provided a similar perspective: "Every semester there are about three to four students that say 'Yes, I am prepared for college.' 'Yes, I should be here.' Out of 25 students, that's disheartening." Victoria provided similar testimony regarding less preparation: "I'll ask them, 'Do you feel high school prepared you well enough?' And the majority of them, they're saying 'No!'"

Different Levels of Support and Encouragement in High School

Most participants speculated that encouragement and support from within the students' prior academic environment to pursue higher education might differentiate successful and struggling Mexican American college students. Once again, it is important to note that perceptions of different levels of support and encouragement in high school were based on course assignments or class discussions. Jody provided the following comment about struggling Mexican American students: "Their teachers, they didn't really spend a lot time working with them. They didn't think they were going to be somebody. Let's just pass them through so they can get their high school diploma." Ashley shared the following sentiments: "Maybe they were never encouraged by teachers or parents as they were growing up, so there is low motivation carried over from high school to college." Additionally, Terry provided the following perspective regarding struggling Latina/o college students while they were in high school: "There were no expectations for non-AP students." Finally, Wilma shared the following perspective about struggling Latina/o students: "Students that weren't in AP, school counselors wouldn't help them apply to community colleges or anything. And I don't think that's right. . . nobody helps them, which I saw in my high school."

Discussion

In this exploratory study, we discovered differences between successful and struggling Mexican American students from the perspectives of individuals uniquely positioned to provide perceptions of such differences. Each seminar instructor who participated in the current study has a history of working with first-year Latina/o students in seminar coursework. Their perceptions of possible differences between successful and less success Latina/o students were based on course assignments, class discussions, and observations in learning framework courses. The current study augments previous literature that only examined the experiences of successful Latina/o college students

(Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2008). Comments and perceptions of individuals who participated in the current study provide insight that there is likely a complex interplay among various factors that might differentiate successful and struggling Mexican American college students.

Participants' perceived several individual differences, including the ability to assimilate and motivation to pursue goals. Participants observed that successful Mexican American college students were more likely to assimilate to the White American culture. This finding is consistent with previous researchers who found a positive relationship between orientation to the Anglo culture with (a) academic performance (Lopez et al., 2002) and (b) decisions to apply to college (Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, & Saldivar, 2010). However, this is one of the first studies to illustrate that successful Mexican American students were more acculturated to the Anglo culture as compared with struggling Latina/o students. Second, participants also revealed possible differences in students' motivation to pursue goals. This finding suggests that struggling Latina/o college students might have a difficult time finding motivation to pursue their academic goals or have clear academic goals. Their self-efficacy might be lower, as were their levels of self-determination. Third, participants indicated that successful Latina/o college students might have different types of support compared with struggling Latina/o students. According to participants, successful Latina/o college students with educated parents not only have a different social class but also valuable social capital (Sommerfield & Bowen, 2013) about the college process. This group of students may develop in homes where undergraduate education is expected and "normal."

Instructors reported that struggling Latina/o college students received less support from high school teachers and counselors. Instructors' perceptions from class discussions and course assignments were that some Mexican American college students not only received higher expectations in high school but also support to reach those expectations. Based on interactions and meaningful conversations with students, these instructors felt that the academic culture experienced in high school was different. Finally, lack of support, fewer resources, and lower academic expectations were mentioned as potential differentiating factors between successful and struggling Latina/o students. Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, and Allen (2009) found that Latina/o students who were not in the top 10% of their graduating class did not have access to college information. Other studies also highlighted Latina/o high school students' testament that high school counselors and teachers only provided high expectations and services to AP Latina/o students (Cavazos, 2009; Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010). Findings from this study provide additional evidence of differences in high schools' messages to their students about college.

Implications for Practice

Participants noticed possible social class and assimilation differences between successful and struggling first-year Mexican American students. We encourage high school counselors to provide opportunities for students to process and reflect on social class and assimilation. School counselors can facilitate small group discussions on ethnic identity, social class, and assimilation (Malott et al., 2010; Zamarripa et al., 2010). We agree with other researchers (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007) that Mexican American students need to process these issues in a safe environment. Aside from

discussing how social class and assimilation can help or hinder transition to higher education, school counselors can provide an outlet for students to express themselves. In sharing their stories, students gain self-awareness and a sense of empowerment in knowing their cultural background may facilitate academic success. We contend that school counselors can help first-year Mexican American students find value in their unique cultural experiences and how making meaning of these experiences can benefit their transition to higher education (White & Epston, 1990).

Results indicate that some first-year Mexican American college students might lack motivation to pursue goals due to high school experiences. School counselors should explore underlying factors related to lack of goals and motivation. Some students may comment that they do not have goals or motivation because of low expectations and lack of support from high school counselors and teachers (Cavazos, 2009; Malott, 2011; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Therefore, student orientation practitioners might have to empower Latina/o students to overcome low expectations, lack of support, and minimal college information from high school counselors and teachers. Positive psychology (Seligman, 2002) and narrative therapy (Cavazos, Holt, & Flamez, 2012; White & Epston, 1990) offer two ways to help students increase motivation and goal setting through awareness raising (e.g., possible career options) and informed planning. Presentations at student orientation or summer bridge programs (Soria, Lingren Clark, & Coffin Koch, 2013) also can be given to students about the relationship among academic goals, motivation, and transition to higher education. We contend that school counselors have an important role in helping Mexican American students improve those factors that facilitate transition to postsecondary education.

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, seminar instructors worked at a Hispanic Serving Institution. Results might not be representative of seminar instructors who work at different institutions of higher education. Second, we did not achieve true triangulation in the current study. Interviews with high school teachers, parents, and/or students would have supplemented findings from interviews with seminar instructors. Third, we did not collect observable or objective data to measure differences between successful and struggling Latina/o students (e.g., GPA). However, it is important to note that this exploratory study was one of the first attempts to discover differences from the perspective of seminar instructors. Finally, this exploratory study investigated seminar instructors' perceptions of differences between successful and struggling Latina/o students. We did not address these instructors' actual effectiveness when working with Latina/o students.

Recommendations for Research

This study's limitations can be addressed in future studies. First, quantitative studies with objective data can investigate observed differences between successful and struggling Latina/o college students. Important factors include resilience, family support, teacher support, cultural characteristics, college knowledge, motivation, and access to a college-going culture. Second, future qualitative research should continue to explore factors identified in the current study, including social class and college knowledge from

parents. Finally, future quantitative and qualitative research examining the relationship between Latina/o students' acculturation and perceptions of success is important.

Conclusion

Most researchers examined personal and family qualities of highly successful Latina/o college students or adults. Fewer studies examine perceived differences between successful and struggling Latina/o college students, particularly from the perspective of university seminar instructors. Given the growing Latina/o population and their lower college attainment compared with other ethnic groups (American Council on Education, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), more research needs to investigate factors that differentiate successful and struggling Latina/o students. In summary, we contend that student-orientation professionals have an important role and responsibility to help first-year Latina/o students improve those factors that contribute to academic performance.

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