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Preparing Latino Students for Life After High School: The Important Role of School Counselors and School Psychologists

Abstract

Latinos represent a significant percentage of the U.S. population; yet, they continue to experience substantial educational challenges in society. The purpose of this paper is to explore the barriers Latino students face in pursuit of educational opportunity and the important role school counselors and school psychologists can play in preparing them for life after high school, whether it be participation in the workforce or attendance at a postsecondary institution. Policy recommendations are provided for educators and policymakers at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Moreover, practice recommendations are offered for school counselors and school psychologists at the secondary level.

Keywords

Latinos, school counselors, school psychologists, workforce preparation, postsecondary education

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), Latinos comprise approximately 55 million or 17% of the total population. They are projected to represent 31% of the population by the year 2060. In 2013, Latino students represented 25%, or 12.1 million, of the K–12 public school student population, which is an increase from 2003 where they accounted for 19% of the student population (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Additionally, in 2013, approximately 41.3 million immigrants resided in the U.S., and 46% of immigrants reported having Hispanic or Latino origins (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Of the school-age population, 5 to 17 years old, more than one in five youth speak a language other than English at home (Zeigler & Camarota, 2014). These demographics call for school professionals (e.g., teachers, school counselors, school psychologists) to be equipped with the necessary skills to address these students' unique educational and social-emotional needs.

While this population continues to grow, the gaps in postsecondary attendance and degree attainment remain behind other racial and ethnic groups including African Americans, Asians, and Whites (Pew Research Center, 2016). In fact, from the moment they begin school, on average, Latino students perform more poorly than their peers (Gándara, 2010). Extant research acknowledges these educational issues among Latino students and the significant impact these issues have on the future of the nation's workforce; yet, minimal progress has

been made in closing these gaps (Gándara, 2010). Compared to their African American counterparts, Latino students are generally underrepresented in their placement in special education (Pérez, Skiba, & Chung, 2009). They also may experience language barriers in school if their native language is not English (Guiberson, 2009; Sullivan, 2011). Additionally, substantial educational challenges exist for Latino students whose family entered the U.S. without proper documentation, including financial barriers to attain a postsecondary education (Diaz-Strong, Gómez, Luna-Duarte, & Meiners, 2011; Frum, 2007). These factors all have significant implications for the development of college and career readiness skills. As school-based professionals, school counselors and school psychologists are uniquely positioned to advocate for the needs of Latino students to ensure that when they complete school, they are college and career ready (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the barriers Latino students face in pursuit of educational opportunity and the important role school counselors and school psychologists can play in preparing them for life after high school, whether it be the workforce and/or attendance at a postsecondary institution. Policy recommendations are provided for educators and policymakers at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Additionally, practice recommendations are offered for school

counselors and school psychologists at the secondary level.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many Latino students encounter unique challenges including both overrepresentation and underrepresentation in special education (Guiberson, 2009; Pérez et al., 2009), limited access to and preparation for college (Crisp & Nora, 2010), underemployment (NCES, 2012; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), undocumented status (Perez, 2010), and language barriers (Becerra, 2012). As these students spend a significant amount of time in school, school professionals such as school counselors and school psychologists possess the skills necessary to address and advocate for their needs.

BARRIERS TO COLLEGE AND WORKFORCE PREPARATION

Educational experiences. Latino students account for 11.8% of the population enrolled in special education, where the majority of these students are identified as having a Specific Learning Disability or a Speech or Language impairment, 42.4% and 21.9%, respectively (NCES, 2016). At the national level, Latino students appear to be fairly represented in special education services; however, these statistics vary dramatically by state and school district (Guiberson, 2009). For instance, in Texas, in the 2014–2015 school year, Latino students comprised 52% of the public school population in the state; yet, they represented 49.4% of students in special education (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Scholars have found that an overrepresentation of Latino students in special education is more likely to occur in predominately White school districts that have an increase in diversity, school district size, and spending per student (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011; Guiberson, 2009). As such, Latino students are often over-referred and misidentified for special education due to

educators' lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity to the needs of students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) or culturally diverse (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011; Ford, 2012; Guiberson, 2009).

While special education services provide opportunities for students to learn to their strengths and receive additional support, it can often create more negative experiences and obstacles for students to navigate (Ford, 2012). For example, Latino students are often educated in environments that view their cultural background and abilities through a deficit lens (Dávila, 2015; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011; Ford, 2012). This deficit lens may lead to low expectations for these students and, ultimately, may push students from using the services and supports they may require to be successful (Dávila, 2015). As these students may struggle with negative external messages, they are likely to experience lower levels of achievement and may not fully realize their potential (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Wu, Morgan, & Farkas, 2014). In addition to low expectations, it is likely that Latino students with disabilities will be placed in more restrictive environments when compared to their White peers with disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010). A lack of access to less restrictive placements often limits Latino students with disabilities from enrollment in rigorous courses, many of which serve as the building blocks of college and career readiness. Further, as academic challenges and negative interactions in the environment increase, Latino students with disabilities may experience social-emotional problems such as low-self esteem, self-efficacy, depression, and anxiety (Castro-Olivo, Preciado, Sanford, & Perry, 2011).

According to recent data published by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (U.S. DOE OCR, 2016), African American and Latino students combined represent 38% of students enrolled in schools that offer AP courses, but only 29% of students enrolled

in at least one AP class. Additionally, African American and Latino students comprise 36% of students in schools offering calculus and only 21% of students enrolled in calculus. Latino students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and when they are enrolled in these courses, they tend to have the lowest AP exam scores (U.S. DOE OCR, 2014). These figures are important to examine because enrollment in high school courses, specifically advanced mathematics courses, have been seen as positive predictors of college persistence (Crisp & Nora, 2010). Musoba and Krichevskiy (2014) also found that enrollment in English and Math courses during Latino students' freshman year of high school were better predictors of college completion at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

Further, since indicators such as academic achievement, standardized test scores, and attendance are predictors of college access and success, it is concerning that Latino students typically have lower grades, standardized test scores, and higher dropout rates than other racial and ethnic groups (Becerra, 2012). Exacerbating these issues, and perhaps a contributing factor, is the point that Latino students are more likely to learn from undertrained and non-credentialed teachers, attend overcrowded schools, and experience minimal support in addressing their unique learning styles (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013).

College and workforce preparation. An increase in college attendance among Latino students emerged over the last few years; data showed that in 2012, 49% of Latino high school graduates enrolled in college compared to 47% of White high school graduates (Pew Research Center, 2013). Nonetheless, due to high dropout rates among Latino students at the secondary level, the percentage of all Latinos ages 18-to-24 years old in college (35%) continues to lag behind the college enrollment rate of Whites (42%) (Pew Research Center, 2016). In earning bachelor's degrees, in 2014,

15% of Latinos aged 25 and older completed their degree compared to 63% of Asians, 41% of Whites, and 22% of African Americans (Pew Research Center, 2016). Therefore, while an increase in college enrollment has emerged for Latinos, additional focus must be centered on retention, persistence, and graduation rates as they continue to trail behind other racial and ethnic minority groups.

In the area of employment, in 2014, only 21.5% of Latinos ages 16 and older worked in the management, business, science, and art occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The low percentage of Latinos working in these professional positions may also be attributed to the limited number of Latinos that hold an advanced degree (e.g., Master's, Professional, Doctorate). In the 2012–2013 school year, 52,990 Master's degrees were awarded to Latinos compared to 455,892 Whites, and while Latinos received 10,107 doctoral degrees, Whites received 110,775 (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). More than half of Latino college students enroll in community college; they are more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to choose this route (Pew Research Center, 2016). Community colleges are thought to serve as a gateway to enrollment at four-year institutions; however, Latino students have low transfer, retention, and graduation rates at four-year institutions (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013).

Language barriers and immigration status. Challenges exist in the classroom solely based on language barriers, which have implications for Latino students whose primary language is not English (Becerra, 2012). In the 2013–2014 school year, ELL students represented 9.3% or 4.5 million students in public school classrooms (NCES, 2016). For these students, they not only have to learn the academic content that their monolingual peers are learning, but also learn English simultaneously (Goldenberg, 2008). Moreover, ELL students must not only learn basic conversational English, also known as Basic Interpersonal Conversational Skills (BICS),

but they also must learn academic language to be successful in school, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979; Goldenberg, 2008). Research indicates that it can take between five and seven years to develop academic language (Thomas & Collier, 2002). The English language acquisition process is lengthy; thus, ELL students require teachers who understand this and the effect it can have on their rate of learning compared to their monolingual peers. Accordingly, teachers require knowledge of oral language development, academic language development, and culturally responsive teaching practices (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

Approximately 11.3 million undocumented immigrants reside in the U.S., and the Latino population makes up the majority of this population (Krogstad & Passel, 2015). Krogstad and Passel (2015) reported that 49% of undocumented immigrants came from Mexico. While college attendance is not completely closed off to undocumented students, the barriers that exist are formidable. Issues such as lack of access to a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, tuition costs, and financial aid are just a few of many challenges to be navigated. Tuition costs have been rising in the U.S. posing a challenge for these students, particularly those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Thirty-nine percent of undocumented students live below the federal poverty line (Frum, 2007). Even with the proposal of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and other legislation advocating for the legal status of undocumented students, the debates surrounding whether or not they should be able to attend postsecondary institutions in the U.S., and whether or not they should pay in-state or out-of-state tuition, persist (Frum, 2007; Perez, 2010). Such issues only further complicate the college-going culture for Latino students.

These factors all play a critical role in Latino students' college access and preparation for success in college and the workforce. Without access to rigorous courses at the secondary level, these students are not well positioned to attend college, may require remedial courses in college, and/or perform poorly in college courses. Overrepresentation and underrepresentation in special education denies students access to the general education curriculum; engenders low expectations and stigma from inappropriate labeling; and contributes to low graduation rates, high dropout rates, minimal job options, and low college enrollment and graduation rates (Sullivan et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a strong need for guidance at the secondary level, and school counselors and school psychologists have the ability to bridge this knowledge gap.

ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

The role of school counselors is to promote and improve the academic achievement, personal and social growth, and college and career development of all students (ASCA, n.d.; ASCA, 2012; Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). Moreover, school counselors are charged with ensuring students are college and career ready by the time of their high school graduation (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy [NOSCA], 2010). School counselors can collaborate with other school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, and school psychologists) to develop a college-going culture in the school environment to reinforce the importance of college attendance (NOSCA, 2010). Creating a college-going culture can occur by nurturing the college aspirations of young Latino students by connecting them with adequate support networks and sponsoring events that are conducive to college and career readiness. For example, school personnel can discuss students' trajectories to college and barriers they may have faced. School counselors can invite other Latino college graduates from

the community and university faculty to discuss their experiences in higher education. Moreover, school counselors can teach Latino students the soft skills (i.e., study habits, time management) needed to be academically successful in college (NOSCA, 2010). School counselors can also use career assessments with Latino students to help them understand their strengths, assets, and career interests and tie it to their high school plan of study.

School counselors can develop school-family-community partnerships to promote college and career readiness for Latino students. Epstein (1987) created the school-family-community partnership model, as she believes that partnerships are beneficial to the academic success of all children (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Epstein, 1987; Epstein et al., 2002). In fact, school counselors believe working with families and the community is a significant part of their duties (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Specifically, school counselors should involve parents in academic course selection, especially rigorous coursework for college preparation, as it is one of the positive indicators of college completion (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014). Additionally, school counselors can help students and families identify Latino centered postsecondary institutions (i.e., HSIs) and those that offer substantive financial aid packages, especially for undocumented families.

School counselors can partner with local colleges/universities to create programmatic activities conducive to college and career readiness of Latino students. For instance, partnerships around service-learning for undergraduates to work with high school students on college preparation is an idea school counselors and colleges/universities could use and would be mutually beneficial (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014). Many school districts partner with local college and universities to offer college-level courses to high school students through dual enrollment or early college experiences; thus, school counselors should ensure Latino

students and families are aware of this option. Finally, school counselors and universities can work together to develop specialized college tours for Latino students to identify resources that will help them best succeed in college.

ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Similar to school counselors, school psychologists possess a wide range of skills that can be utilized to help Latino students become college and career ready. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010) outlines various areas that provide school psychologists the opportunity to extend their work to the Latino population, including students in general education and special education and ELL students. Areas of contribution include participating in student support team meetings and IEP meetings, facilitating parental involvement, consultation and collaboration with school staff, and identification of interventions and resources for Latino students.

School psychologists can play a significant role in aiding in the transition from high school to a postsecondary institution or the workforce (Joyce & Grapin, 2012; Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, & Test, 2015) for Latino students. Prout and Cowan (2006) suggested that school psychologists take part in meetings such as student support team meetings and Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings to assist in the process of developing a successful plan for transition. In these settings, such as student support team meetings, individual students or groups of students can be identified that demonstrate a need for further assistance in developing a plan for enrolling in college and/or acquiring the skills needed to obtain a particular job or career field. For Latino students receiving special education services with an IEP, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), a transition

plan is required once a student turns 16 years old; thus, this plan must explicitly address the students' needs for their future and how the school will help the student achieve those goals.

In both of these processes, not only is the participation of the school psychologist encouraged (Joyce & Rossen, 2006), but also that of the student and their parents. The student's voice is particularly important in helping to identify future goals; this can occur formally through the use of career assessment and interest tools (Levinson & Palmer, 2005) and informally through discussions with the student. Additionally, parents play an important role in their child's future; therefore, gaining their perspective on their child's skills and needs is useful (Harris, Mayes, Vega, & Hines, 2016). School staff including school psychologists can provide parents with information such as costs of college attendance, paying for college, and potential career opportunities for their children (Vega, 2016).

The collaboration of school personnel is essential in meeting the needs of Latino students. School psychologists can engage in consultation with teachers to assist in developing interventions for Latino students including ELL students. The NASP (2010) model indicates that, "school psychologists utilize a problem-solving framework for addressing the needs of English language learners" (p. 8). Therefore, school psychologists can assist teachers in identifying effective instructional practices for ELL students. Moreover, school psychologists seek to understand the needs of diverse students and provide culturally competent practices (NASP, 2010) including when they assess Latino and ELL students for special education eligibility. Therefore, school psychologists must acknowledge the effect culture and language can have on the validity of assessment results and take steps to ensure they are conducting culturally responsive evaluations (Martines, 2008; NASP, 2015).

DISCUSSION

There is a clear need for educators to work collaboratively to ensure Latino students are prepared for college and the workforce following high school. Latino students experience numerous obstacles in their advancement and success in society due to educational inequities; thus, there is a need for practitioners to understand their culture and respond to their needs by preparing them for this critical transition after high school. School counselors and school psychologists have the skills and training to facilitate college and career readiness for Latino students. Therefore, school administrators should seek to utilize their staff such as school counselors and school psychologists in innovative ways that expand their role beyond clerical duties and assessment and evaluation duties (Speight & Vera, 2009; Vega, 2016). Advising these students on the courses they should take to prepare them for college is imperative (Nevarez & Rico, 2007; NOSCA, 2010). Additionally, once Latino students enter college, efforts are needed to support them to ensure they persist through graduation. Activities such as developing partnerships between public schools and universities, providing families with access to information about college, and increased access to financial aid resources including scholarships and assistance for undocumented students is necessary (Nevarez & Rico, 2007; Oliva, 2008). Moreover, a focus on preparing these students for the workforce is needed. Educators at the secondary level should identify school policies that hinder or support students. At the postsecondary level, policies that support enrollment and persistence should be implemented. Recommendations for secondary and postsecondary institutions are discussed below as well as practice recommendations for school counselors and school psychologists.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Educators including school counselors and school psychologists should be familiar with educational policies and their impact on the educational outcomes of Latino students. In order to do this, school counselors and school psychologists should closely examine data to understand the impact of such policies.

Discipline. Data regarding discipline policies and procedures should be disaggregated to understand the rate that Latino students are being disciplined as well as the kind of discipline being used (e.g. suspension, expulsion, etc.). Disproportionality may indicate the need for policy changes and areas for professional development for educators.

Rigorous courses. Policies regarding course eligibility (e.g., Advanced Placement courses, honors courses, etc.) should be examined to understand the impact on course taking trends for Latino students. Alternative policies and criteria should be developed to allow for increased access to rigorous courses.

Special education. Special education referral and identification rates should be monitored to ensure that Latino students are not disproportionately referred or represented in special education services (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011; Ford, 2012; Guiberson, 2009). Further, educational placement procedures need to be examined to ensure that Latino students are not disproportionately placed in more restrictive educational environments. These identification and placement rates may indicate a need for more training on culturally responsive pedagogy and practices.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The implications for postsecondary institutions are also vast. Most university admissions offices already consider what each high school student has accomplished during their high school years according to the type of courses students were

able to access at their high schools. This helps to ensure that a student will not be unfairly evaluated for what might seem to be a much less rigorous transcript compared to students from other districts that had more courses from which to choose.

Eighteen states have policies specifying eligibility criteria for in-state tuition determined by state legislation or Board of Regents decisions, and six states allow undocumented students to receive financial aid (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). These policies must be enacted on a larger level to enable undocumented students in all states to access and finance a higher education. Not doing so can present an insurmountable financial barrier in front of undocumented Latino students seeking to attain a higher education. This is also particularly challenging for Latino students whose families are on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Additional policies at the postsecondary level should address the increasing need for college representatives to visit Latino communities to speak with Latino students and families, especially early in their educational experience. To that end, increased communication with school counselors and school psychologists can help to ensure that Latino students have access to information and resources that will help to facilitate their successful transition to college.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

1. School counselors should build authentic relationships with parents and families to gain credibility to communicate the importance of early college planning and preparation (Hurley & Coles, 2015). School counselors can hold personal individual meetings with families to discuss “the best fit” for college (i.e., local college, going off to college, two-year vs. four-year, etc.) and develop a plan for college attendance.

2. School counselors must advocate for more resources, especially bilingual information, to ensure that Latino families, including Spanish-speaking and undocumented families, receive information to make the best decision for their children, particularly around college choice and preparation.
3. School counselors should conduct ongoing individual planning meetings with Latino students to help them establish academic and personal goals and to assist with strategically planning their future (ASCA, 2012). These meetings must involve choosing rigorous course work, discussions around college planning, and strategic planning for successful entry into college.
4. School counselors must create a college-going culture where expectations of Latino students going to college are the norm and not the exception (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). In collaboration with school administrators, school counselors can create an environment where attending a postsecondary institution is celebrated and an achievable goal. For example, school counselors can create an area in the office where college information and materials are available for students and families to view.
5. School counselors must offer extensive activities and information around financial aid packages and planning (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007; Hurley & Coles, 2015). Providing this service is necessary because many Latino college-bound students may be the first in their family to attend college and may encounter other barriers such as language barriers and low socioeconomic status (Hurley & Coles, 2015).
6. It is also critical for school counselors to form partnerships with community stakeholders who hold significant influence in the lives of Latino students. Extending the reach of the school in this way can provide wrap-around support for students that is necessary to ensure their empowerment to pursue postsecondary training. It also increases the level of accountability by sharing that responsibility with existing significant others in the lives of Latino students (e.g., family, church, etc.).
7. School counselors can also facilitate strong peer group influence amongst Latino students through group counseling experiences. Highlighting and reinforcing the strengths of Latino students in the group context, while also providing ways through which they can encourage and hold each other accountable, helps to ensure that the work toward postsecondary training continues beyond the school counselor's office. Peer group influence can be very strong, if not stronger, than adult influence, and a base for this positive peer pressure could be the group counseling setting that school counselors arrange.

PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

1. School psychologists must understand the cultural perspectives of Latino families and acknowledge barriers to participation in school (i.e., language proficiency, work schedules) (Peña, Silva, Claro, Gamarra, & Parra, 2008). Personal contact (i.e., phone calls, home visits) and the use of interpreters are beneficial in increasing home-school collaboration as it pertains to college and career readiness.
2. It is essential for school psychologists to collaborate with school counselors to identify Latino students that require guidance in developing plans for after high school. They can meet with groups of students on a regular basis to provide

direction in developing a plan for after high school and the steps necessary to meet those goals.

3. School psychologists must be competent in evaluating Latino students for special education, including ELL students. Students misidentified as having a disability are often limited in their opportunities to access the advanced courses needed to be successful in college. Thus, the implications are significant and the training of school psychologists is crucial (NASP, 2015).
4. School psychologists should consult with teachers to develop and identify research-based interventions to address the needs of ELL students (NASP, 2015). A continuum of intervention and instructional supports based on a student's level of English language proficiency is necessary to meet the unique needs of these students (Brown & Doolittle, (2008).
5. School psychologists may provide structured professional development activities (i.e., in-service training) to increase teachers' knowledge of the English language acquisition process and how it relates to the rate of learning. This may help teachers set more accurate expectations for students' progress in the classroom (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).
6. School psychologists' engagement in advocacy for Latino students is critical to the development of their college and career readiness skills. Therefore, they must be aware of the barriers Latino students encounter that affect their college and career preparedness and communicate with key stakeholders (i.e., administrators, teachers) when injustices are present such as limited access to advanced courses.

CONCLUSION

It is in the best interest of our nation to invest in the education of Latino students. With the significant increase in the Latino population in the U.S. and a shortage of educated workers, the advancement of the education of this group is key (Excelencia in Education, 2015; Nevarez & Rico, 2007; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Moreover, one's ethnic identity should not determine access to college and career readiness; however, discrepant college enrollment and degree attainment rates indicate inequitable access. Both school counselors and school psychologists should take a visible, proactive role in facilitating the educational success of Latino students by providing them with opportunities to advance their college and career readiness skills.

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