

**School Counselors' Perceptions of Differences Between Successful and Less  
Successful Latina/o High School Students**

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## Abstract

In this qualitative study, we conducted in-depth interviews with secondary school counselors to understand differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students. Using an ecological framework as a theoretical lens, we highlighted differences between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students consistent with individual, interpersonal, and institutional categories. The following themes emerged: determination and commitment, motivation, goal setting, positive behavior and attitudes, family support, role models, school and teacher support, socioeconomic status, and environment. Following a discussion regarding differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students, we provide recommendations for researchers and school counselors to identify studies and interventions to help Latina/o students become academically successful.

*Keywords:* Latina/o students, school counselors, ecological framework

## **School Counselors' Perceptions of Differences Between Successful and Less Successful Latina/o High School Students**

The Latina/o population is the fastest growing group in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012) with Latina/o students projected to comprise 23% of the U.S. school population in 2020 (Malott, Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010). Despite this demographic shift, Latina/o students continue to have low academic achievement and the highest high school dropout rates in the United States when compared to African American students (American Council on Education, 2012). There are academic and personal challenges that contribute to Latina/o students' low academic achievement, including low expectations from teachers (Cavazos, 2009), low expectations from school counselors (Vela-Gude et al., 2009), minimal college information (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin & Allen, 2009), and curriculum tracking (Cavazos, 2009; Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013). Although researchers examined single-level factors (e.g., individual) on Latina/o students' postsecondary preparation or success, no study used an ecological framework as a theoretical lens to discover how individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors might influence Latina/o students' educational experiences. Results from the current study might have important implications for school counselors, teachers, and other stakeholders who want to help Latina/o students pursue postsecondary education.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The current study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological framework to understand how individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors might differentiate successful Latina/o students from less successful ones. We agree with Bronfenbrenner

(1994) who contends that important outcomes (e.g., academic achievement) can be the product of multiple factors (i.e., individual, interpersonal, and institutional). Whereas Byrd and McKinney (2012) and Ojeda and Pina-Watson (2013) adapted an ecological framework to understand college students' mental health and Latino male laborers' life satisfaction, we adapted this framework in the current study to understand school counselors' perceptions of possible differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students. We selected this model as a theoretical lens because of its applicability to understand and contextualize important outcomes such as academic performance. Participants in the current study might offer characteristics that differentiate successful from less successful Latina/o students that are consistent with an ecological framework. It is important to mention that although an ecological framework guided the literature review, data collection, and data analysis, we did not use *a priori* ecological categories. Once we identified emergent themes through inductive data analysis, we determined if themes were consistent with individual, interpersonal, or institutional categories.

### **Individual Factors**

The individual level refers to physical, cognitive, and emotional health, as well as intrapersonal functioning (Kitzrow, 2003). For Latina/o students, important individual factors include coping efficacy, motivation, academic self-efficacy, and goal setting. Zalaquett (2006) found that sense of accomplishment, responsibility toward others, and value of education helped Latina/o college students succeed in higher education. Many participants understood education was important to their personal and academic futures. Additionally, Cavazos et al. (2010) investigated factors that facilitated high academic

achievement in Latina/o college students and found that these students had high intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and goal setting. Moreover, Zalaquett, Alvarez-McHatton, and Cranstron-Gingras (2007) revealed that Latina/o migrant farm-worker students described themselves as motivated, competitive, and focused on higher education. Finally, Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) found that Latina/o college students would come to terms with their situation, utilize positive self-talk, turn negative expectations into positive motivation, and would self-reflect in order to overcome personal and academic challenges. The aforementioned studies highlight the importance of individual factors on Latina/o students' high academic achievement. Successful Latina/o students appear to have individual characteristics, including self-efficacy, coping responses, and motivation, to succeed academically.

### **Interpersonal Factors**

The interpersonal level refers to students' perceptions of social environments (Friedlander, Redi, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Two salient interpersonal factors include school connectedness and family connectedness. School connectedness refers to perceptions of adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education, and school environment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Family connectedness includes perceptions of family identity, family mutual activities, and family cohesion (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). The presence of mentoring (Zalaquett, 2006) and family support (Cavazos et al., 2010) has been found to consistently predict Latina/o students' academic success. Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) analyzed stories of 13 successful Latina/o college students to explore the role of mentoring in their academic careers. Zalaquett and Lopez found 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” (p. 346). In a similar study, Martinez (2013) interviewed 20 Latina/o high school students and illustrated how school counselors were instrumental in the college-choice process. School counselors were important resources of college information and college planning. Other researchers (e.g., Vela, Lu, Veliz, Johnson, & Castro, 2014) also highlighted the important role of family and mentors on Latina/o students’ academic success. Although researchers highlighted the importance of interpersonal factors, no study examined how interpersonal factors might differentiate successful from less successful Latina/o students.

### **Institutional Factors**

The institutional level refers to academic setting, campus climate, and academic requirements (Astin, 1993). Three salient institutional factors include academic climate, college-going culture, and enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) coursework. First, school climate refers to students’ perceptions of caring and supportive relationships, feelings and attitudes toward school, and knowledge of disciplinary policies (Wilson, 2004). Many Latina/o students perceived their academic environment as hostile and unwelcoming (Malott, 2011), as well as lack of caring relationships from school counselors (Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Second, a college-going culture on high school campuses involves students’ perceptions of college preparation activities, college talk, teacher advocacy, and counselor advocacy (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). Researchers (Cavazos, 2009; Vela-Gude et al., 2009) found that Latina/o students did not perceive high expectations from school personnel and did not have access to

college information, providing evidence that Latina/o students did not perceive a college-going culture. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that Latina/o students do not have equal access to AP coursework (Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Yamamura, 2009). Perhaps more disturbing is that tracking Latina/o students into non-college preparatory tracks is prevalent despite literature that points to the detrimental effects of academic tracking (Cavazos, 2009; Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010). Taken together, the aforementioned findings suggest that institutional factors might play a role in differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students.

Based on previous research (Cavazos et al., 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006), individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors influence Latina/o students' academic experiences. However, most research relied on self-awareness and recollection by successful Latina/o students regarding those characteristics and conditions that helped them succeed (Cavazos et al., 2010; Zalaquett, 2006). There is a gap in the literature examining school counselors' perceptions of differences between successful and struggling Latina/o 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. All school counselors in the current study had experiences working with Mexican American students via classroom guidance, individual counseling, small group counseling, and career advisement. As a result, the purpose of the current study was to extend previous research by examining differences between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students from the perspectives of secondary school counselors. Successful students were defined as students with high course grades and

perceived potential to succeed in postsecondary education, while less successful Latina/o students were defined as those who left high school, performed poorly in coursework, or had minimal perceived potential to succeed in postsecondary education. This definition of successful and less successful Latina/o students appears to be consistent with previous literature (Cavazos et al., 2010; Zalaquett, 2006). An understanding of school counselors' perceptions might inform interventions, programs, or policies to help Latina/o students prepare and succeed in postsecondary education. Therefore, we explored the following research question: What are secondary school counselors' perceptions of differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students?

### **Method**

We utilized a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to understand experiences and perspectives of a specific group of secondary school counselors. Phenomenological approaches focus on "questions about everyday, lived, human experiences" (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010, p. 136). We selected this approach to provide in-depth insight into a specific phenomenon and understand the meaning of our participants (Maxwell & Henriksen, 2012). Given that participants have a plethora of counseling and teaching experiences with Latina/o students, they may be able to provide important insight into differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students.

### **Participants**

We used purposeful and criterion sampling procedures (Creswell, 2009) to recruit six school counselors with experience working with Latina/o students. Gay, Mills, and

Airasian (2012) defined purposive sampling as, “the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population” (p. 141). We used criterion sampling to make sure participants met a specific criterion and hence criterion sampling (e.g., six plus years of counseling experience and experience working with Latina/o students). We obtained permission from the school district and Institutional Review Board at a university in the southwestern United States. All participants currently work or worked at secondary schools with predominantly Latina/o students. School counselors in the current study worked at school districts with over 90% Latina/o student-population. Several school counselors worked in a school district that was identified as the poorest region in the United States. Additionally, we obtained informed consent from each participant and assured confidentiality throughout the process. All participants had at least a Master’s degree in guidance and counseling at the time of data collection. Each participant worked with Latina/o high school students for a minimum of 6 years to a maximum of 33 years. Their ages ranged from 35 to 51 years at the time of data collection. Participants’ interactions with Latina/o students included individual counseling, group counseling, psycho-educational presentations, and previous teaching experiences. As a result of working with Latina/o students, these school counselors can provide important insight regarding differences between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students. Each school counselor was assigned a pseudonym and is referred to by this name throughout this article.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Individual interviews were initiated with the following question: “Based on your experiences, what are the differences, if any, between your successful and struggling

Latina/o students?" An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions focusing on differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Zalaquett, 2006). Inquiry explored participants' perceptions and experiences working with successful and less successful Latina/o students. Successful students were defined as students with high course grades and perceived potential to succeed in postsecondary education, while less successful Latina/o students were defined as those who left high school, performed poorly in coursework, or minimal perceived potential to succeed in postsecondary education. The first and third authors conducted all interviews, and each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Finally, interviewing secondary school counselors was used in previous studies to examine perspectives of Latina/o high school students' college readiness (Yamamura et al., 2010). We also used a similar approach to Johnson et al.'s (2008) study in which coaches were interviewed to understand differences between elite and sub-elite athletes. While it is important to collect data from service-recipients (i.e., Latina/o students), it is important to gather experiences and perceptions of a group of individuals who interact with students in a number of capacities (e.g., individual counseling). These school counselors might provide valuable insight into differences in academic achievement. We interviewed six secondary school counselors as data saturation was reached following the sixth interview.

An inductive qualitative interview approach was used to discover perspectives of school counselors with valid insight into the area of interest in this study (Johnson et al., 2008). Interviews were analyzed inductively via verbatim transcriptions of interviews that focused on school counselors' perceptions of differences between successful and less

successful Latina/o students. Although we used an ecological framework to guide the literature review and data collection, no *a priori* themes were used in data analysis. While it was anticipated that emergent themes would align with categories from an ecological framework, only the lead author was privy to this hypothesis. We used a qualitative approach similar to Johnson et al. (2008) and Gonzalez (2012) in which theories were used to structure and understand findings. We used two coding cycles to determine common themes. First, two researchers 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. Additionally, researchers examined emergent themes, compared themes to the ecological framework, and placed themes into individual, interpersonal, and institutional categories in order to contextualize participants' perceptions of differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students.

### **Trustworthiness**

A number of steps were implemented to enhance this study's trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). First, member-checking (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) was established with each transcript emailed to the respective participant with an opportunity to provide feedback or make changes. None of the participants indicated that changes were necessary. Second, in order to ensure dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1984), multiple reviewers coded and identified emergent themes. Multiple reviewers also agreed on each theme's placement into an ecological category (i.e., individual, interpersonal, or institutional). Finally, the lead researcher paid attention to confirmability (Creswell, 1998) through reflections and ongoing consultation to ensure bias did not

impact data collection or analysis. This researcher is a Mexican American male with a research agenda focused on Mexican American students' resiliency and mental health. His reflections on differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students guided this study's literature review, method, results, and discussion. As a result, the research team met multiple times to discuss the inductive analytic process.

## **Results**

Following inductive, qualitative data analysis, several themes were identified: determination and commitment, motivation, goal setting, positive behavior and attitudes, family support, role models, school and teacher support, socioeconomic status, and environment. These findings are shown through the lens of the following ecological categories: individual, interpersonal, and institutional. It is important to mention that all themes identified in the current study were derived via inductive data analysis.

Following the emergence of themes, the research team met multiple times to place themes into ecological categories. An ecological framework can help in understanding how individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors separate successful from less successful Latina/o high school students. In this sense, an ecological framework helps contextualize school counselors' perceptions of Latina/o students.

### **Individual**

Themes that were consistent within the individual category include comments from participants identifying their perspectives that successful Latina/o high school students have internal qualities that differentiate them from less successful Latina/o students. These factors include determination and commitment, motivation, goal setting, and positive behavior and attitudes.

**Determination and commitment.** Secondary school counselors opined that successful Latina/o high school students were determined and committed to academic success. According to participants in the current study, successful students were committed to working hard as well as determined to prove they could succeed. Julia offered the following perspective about a successful student: “She had improved a lot, but it was her hard work also. She was determined. She worked hard, and she was one of those that didn’t give up.” Stephanie provided an additional line of evidence when she discussed a successful student’s determination:

Individual characteristics like determination... And he, that was his determination, his determination to say, you know what, I am going to prove everybody wrong, and I’m going to prove this to myself. I can do it, and I’m going to do it.

**Motivation.** According to participants, motivation differed between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students. Priscilla provided the following perspective of her successful and less successful Latina/o students when she shared, “I have seen kids that didn’t have any of that [support] and they have the self-motivation to overcome that.” In addition to self-motivation, some participants mentioned extrinsic motivation, including Patricia who said, “I think they have intrinsic motivation...but for the most part, it’s the external motivation.”

**Goal setting.** The identification and pursuit of academic goals emerged when participants identified that goal setting played a role in differentiating successful and less successful Latina/o students. These school counselors identified that their successful Latina/o students have higher academic and professional goals relative to their less successful Latina/o students. Priscilla shared, “a lot of times, the students that

are very successful are very goal oriented." Additionally, successful Latina/o students were identified as individuals who were not only taught about goal setting but also willing to learn about and identify goals. Angie mentioned this important factor of goal-setting as she talked about less successful Latina/o students, "I think that many children, including my own, until I taught them, don't know how to set a goal and achieve it."

**Positive behaviors and attitudes.** Almost all participants stated that positive behaviors and attitudes were among the most important differentiating factors in academic achievement. According to these school counselors, commitment to positive attitude and behavior differed between successful and less successful Latina/o students. When it comes to academic achievements, Stephanie shared the following: "I think it really depends on their attitude." Finally, Priscilla shared the following story about successful Latina/o students' positive attitude:

A lot of time students that are very successful...they know what they want and they want to better themselves... They are very driven...some of these kids have perhaps good morals, values along the way, and there are certain variables that these students who tend to be successful have and you will notice that...

### **Interpersonal**

Themes that were consistent within the interpersonal category include comments from secondary school counselors identifying their perspectives that successful Latina/o high school students have interpersonal factors that differentiate them from less successful Latina/o students. Themes that emerged in the interpersonal category included family support and role models.

**Family support.** The need for efficacious family support was emphasized in the current study. Most participants explained that support and encouragement from family differentiated successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones. This support included high academic expectations and encouragement to meet those expectations. Stephanie provided the following comment about successful students with family support: "Those Hispanic students that have high parental support are more successful. Because, the parents are helping them to maneuver through the academic part." Priscilla offered additional lines of evidence with the following: "a lot of times they (successful students) will have a very supportive background and you will see that... The parents expect them to do good and have certain expectations, and they are supposed to meet those expectations." Priscilla shared a similar perspective: "Well a lot of times with the kids that are less successful, number one, either they don't apply themselves, or they have a very severe problem at home."

**Role models.** One of the most salient interpersonal factors that differentiated successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones was role models. According to participants in the current study, less successful Latina/o high school students did not have positive role models in their home environments. Patricia provided the following succinct comment about lack of role models: "They don't have the role models at home most of the time, especially an educational role model. And even just a basic work ethic model-they don't have that." Stephanie provided specific examples of less successful Latina/o students. Her comment proceeded as follows,

The less successful ones are the ones that, they don't have any supervision.

Because, for various reasons, because maybe grandma is raising them, maybe

it's a neighbor. And unfortunately on the flipside, we have a lot of drug addicted parents that have no parenting skills.

## Institutional

Themes that were consistent with the institutional category include comments from secondary school counselors identifying their perspectives that institutional factors differentiate successful Latina/o students from less successful ones. Themes that emerged in the institutional category included school and teacher support, socioeconomic status, and environment.

**School and teacher support.** Almost all participants reported that support from teachers differentiated successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones. Positive support and high academic expectations appeared to play an important role in different academic achievement levels among Latina/o students. Julia provided the following comment about the importance of teacher support:

I think teachers have to deal with it. Did they [students] go through teachers that have a lot of patience? That they didn't let them fall...It goes back to how hard is the teacher willing to work with the student. Sometimes teachers get frustrated...they just give up on students.

Stephanie provided a similar perspective when she said: "And setting forth the positive as an educator, putting forth the positive... so the impact the educators make on Hispanic students life is tremendous also." Finally, Bertha provided the following succinct comment about different expectations and support from teachers:

We try to save as many as we can, and we do reach out to all of them. Some of them do fall through the cracks, and it is sad. We do have teachers that are very supportive, and you do have some that are not as supportive.

**Socioeconomic status.** One of the most important institutional factors that differentiated successful Latina/o students from less successful ones was socioeconomic status (SES). Most participants provided comments that successful Latina/o high school students were from a higher SES. Julia shared the following perspective about successful and less successful students,

Her family is economically stable; the other one is not... where the students might feel obligated to work because they want to help the family. Mom is struggling at home, they can't pay their bills, and sometimes the student might feel like they might want to work.

Stephanie provided similar testimony: "We need money. You got to work...Money is a huge thing. Even though they got loans, you know you have those that are in the middle...that can't afford that 15 grand that they'll have to go into the hole for everything else. Money is a huge factor."

**Environment.** The final category that materialized from this data involved students' living environments. Bertha provided the following representative comment when she succinctly reported, "...(parents) they're educated in the gang life. They're educated in being incarcerated. So most of those kids were being raised by their grandparents, which only spoke Spanish." Priscilla provided additional lines of evidence when she shared, "Well, a lot of times with the kids that are less successful, number

one, they don't apply themselves or they have a very severe problem at home...it goes down to a lot of times, their home life..."

## **Discussion**

Guided by an ecological framework (Brofenbrenner, 1994) to structure and understanding findings, we revealed individual, interpersonal, and institutional differences between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students. This is one of the first studies to examine differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students from the perspectives of secondary school counselors. The current study addressed calls for future research by Vela et al. (2014) who emphasized the importance of interviewing current school counselors about their experiences with Latina/o students. Each school counselor who participated in the current study has a history of working with successful and less successful Latina/o high school students. This augments previous literature that only looked at the experiences and characteristics of successful Latina/o students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2008). Comments from individuals who participated in the current study provide insights that there is likely a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that differentiate successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones. While an ecological framework guided the literature review, data collection, and data analysis, a priori categories were not developed. All themes identified in the current study were consistent with individual, interpersonal, and institutional categories.

First, participants indicated that successful Latina/o students have higher levels of determination and commitment, motivation, goals, and positive behaviors and attitudes. Consistent with previous literature (Cavazos et al., 2010), participants

indicated that successful Latina/o students have motivation, high academic goals, and positive coping responses. However, this is one of the first studies to indicate that less successful Latina/o students do not have similar motivation, goals, or commitment to educational endeavors. Second, participants identified several interpersonal factors, including family support and role models. Although previous researchers (Cavazos, Cavazos, Hinojosa, & Silva, 2009; Gonzalez, Stein, Shannonhouse, & Prinstein, 2012) asserted that Latina/o parents value education and/or are supportive, several participants cited examples of Latina/o parents who were not supportive of education. This finding indicates that although Latina/o parents are beginning to understand and value higher education, other Latina/o parents are not as supportive, which may be an important factor contributing to lack of academic success. Finally, there were several institutional factors that differentiated successful Latina/o students from less successful ones. These factors included socioeconomic status, school and teacher support, and environment. The impact of SES continues to be an important theme among barriers or challenges that impede Latina/o students from postsecondary education (Vela et al., 2014). It is also disconcerting that some teachers continue to differentiate support and expectations among Latina/o students (Cavazos, 2009; Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010).

### **Implications for Practice**

Results provide important implications to improve individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that differentiate successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones. First, results indicate that Latina/o high school students continue to perceive personal and family challenges to higher education. Therefore, an important implication for high school counselors is to help Latina/o students cope with academic

and personal challenges. Cavazos et al. (2010) examined coping responses that Latina/o college students used to overcome personal and academic challenges. Some coping responses included acceptance, positive self-talk, using low expectations as motivation to persevere, and self-reflection. Results from the current study also provide evidence that some Latina/o parents are not supportive of their children's educational plans. Therefore, it might be important to provide support to Latina/o parents in order to help them support and encourage their children. We agree with Ali and Saunders (2006) who recommended workshops to help parents learn about career and college information. Such workshops could help parents understand the importance of education and career development as well as provide strategies to encourage and support their children.

Given the importance of high academic expectations in academic performance and college enrollment, high school counselors can make a concerted effort to establish and maintain a college culture in which all Latina/o students are encouraged to pursue and succeed in higher education. Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, and Saldivar (2010) found that Mexican American high school students expected their school to have the most important role in establishing a college-culture. Their findings suggest that school personnel (e.g., teachers and counselors) play an integral role in creating a college-going culture and helping students pursue and succeed in higher education. In the current study, differences in expectations and support from teachers were found to differentiate successful Latina/o high school students from less successful ones. Therefore, we contend that high school teachers, counselors, and other stakeholders communicate high expectations and unconditional support to all Latina/o students,

thereby creating a college-going culture. In order to create a college-culture, there needs to be a change not only with policy and mission statements but also with individual adherence and beliefs in such statements (Darling-Hammond, 1990).

School counselors also can use several theories to help less successful Latina/o students develop individual qualities related to academic performance. Possible theories include Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2002). School counselors can utilize Narrative Therapy to help Latina/o students establish goals, re-author stories, and identify unique outcomes. By using Narrative Therapy, school counselors will take a post-modern and positive approach to help Latina/o students become academically successful (Cavazos, Holt, & Flamez, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). Finally, school counselors can teach and cultivate characteristics that might increase Latina/o students' motivation and goal setting. These factors include optimistic explanatory style (Seligman, 2006), psychological grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), and meaning in life (Steger & Shin, 2010). When school counselors increase Latina/o students' optimism, grit, and meaning in life, they might indirectly impact Latina/o students' academic performance. As one possibility, school counselors can facilitate psycho-educational presentations on the relationship among optimism, meaning in life, and academic performance (Steger & Shin, 2010).

### **Recommendations for Research**

Based on this study's findings, there are several implications for future research. First, quantitative studies can investigate differences between successful and less successful Latina/o high school students on individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors. An ecological model with individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors can

be useful to understand differences in Latina/o students' educational experiences and achievement. Possible institutional factors include perceptions of a college-going culture, access to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework or college information, and mentoring services. Possible individual factors include motivation, optimism, goal setting, and psychological grit. Second, future studies need to investigate how individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors impact Latina/o students' postsecondary preparation, access, persistence, and completion. Longitudinal and single-subject case designs will provide important insight regarding causal factors of Latina/o students' academic success. Finally, researchers can explore specific experiences, discussions, and activities that help Latina/o students develop individual factors, such as resiliency and positive coping responses, which have been found beneficial in high academic achievement (Cavazos et al., 2010). More outcome-based research to determine interventions or counseling services that increase factors related to high academic performance is necessary.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, school counselors worked at secondary schools with predominantly Latina/o high school students. Results might not be representative of school counselors who work in other settings (e.g., schools where Latina/o students are the ethnic minority). Second, we did not achieve true triangulation in the current study. Interviews with teachers, parents, and/or students would have supplemented findings from interviews with school counselors. Finally, this qualitative study investigated school counselors' perceptions of differences between successful and less successful Latina/o students. We did not

address these school counselors' actual effectiveness when working with Latina/o students.

### **Conclusion**

Most researchers examined personal and family qualities of highly successful Latina/o college students or adults (Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2008). Fewer studies examine differences between successful and struggling Latina/o high school students, particularly from the perspective of school counselors. Our findings provide evidence of a complex interplay among individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors that differentiate successful Latina/o students from less successful ones, according to school counselors' perceptions. In summary, counselors, teachers, and other stakeholders might consider individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors to improve Latina/o students' educational experiences and academic performance.

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