

**Understanding Support From School Counselors as Predictors of Mexican
American Adolescents' College-Going Beliefs**

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Abstract

The impact of high school counselors' support on Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs was examined. We used a quantitative, predictive design to explore predictors of Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Perceptions of accessibility and expectations from school counselors positively impacted college-going beliefs while perceptions of appraisal negatively impacted college-going beliefs. In addition to a discussion regarding the importance of these findings, implications for school counselors and researchers are offered.

Keywords: School counselor support, college-going beliefs, Mexican American adolescents

Understanding Support From School Counselors as Predictors of Mexican American Adolescents' College-Going Beliefs

The Hispanic population is one of the fastest growing groups in the United States with Mexican Americans making up the largest sub-group of the overall Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a). It is well documented that compared with 30.3% among Whites, 10.6% of Mexican Americans received a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Additionally, the achievement gap between Mexican American students and their peers is well-known in areas such as high school completion rates and test scores (American Council on Education, 2012). Mexican American high school students also continue to have low academic completion rates (American Council on Education, 2012), particularly because of individual, interpersonal, and institutional challenges (Vela, Lu, Veliz, Johnson, & Castro, 2014). One source of support for Mexican American students to overcome challenges to postsecondary education is school counselors who can use the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) National Model to support this growing population (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). School counselors also have an important responsibility to help Mexican American students access and select colleges (Martinez, 2013). In the current article, we begin with a literature review that focuses on the ASCA National Model as a conceptual framework. We also highlight Mexican American adolescents' positive and negative experiences with high school counselors. Next, we introduce findings from Mexican American adolescents who provided perceptions of support from high school counselors and college-going self-efficacy. Finally, we provide a discussion regarding

the importance of these findings, as well as implications for school counselors and future research.

ASCA National Model and School-Based Social Capital

The roles and responsibilities of professional school counselors include helping students in a number of areas, such as personal, social, and career development (Studer, 2005). High school counselors are provided specific strategies to help Mexican American students overcome systemic challenges and enroll in postsecondary education. For example, the ASCA National Model (2012) can be used to help Latina/o students (Villalba et al., 2007) with guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. First, guidance curriculum focuses on information sessions for students and/or parents (Studer, 2005). In order to provide students with information concerning AP coursework, career exploration, or college information, school counselors can facilitate class discussions about the importance of college-preparatory coursework (Ohrt, Lambie, & Ieva, 2009), college information, or career exploration. Second, individual student planning involves meeting individually with students. Such meetings could focus on requirements to enroll in AP coursework (Studer, 2005), college information (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009), or character strengths (Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012). Third, responsive services involve individual or group counseling to focus on personal and social development. Finally, part of system support focuses on collaboration among important stakeholders to maximize student services (Studer, 2005). Collaboration may involve working with teachers, administrators, and parents to increase enrollment and

preparedness for AP coursework (Ohrt et al., 2009) as well as postsecondary education.

School counselors also can use the ASCA National Model (2012) to create school-based social capital (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). School-based social capital focuses on relationships, patterns, and interactions between students and important school personnel such as school counselors (Bryan et al., 2011). This form of social capital focuses on counselors' investment, (i.e., helpful behaviors) in high school students (Metheny, McWhirter, & O'Neil, 2008). Some researchers suggest that school counselors provide students school-based social capital by offering academic assistance, guidance about academic programs, and information about postsecondary education (Bryan et al., 2011). Two implications involved (a) creating a college-going culture and (b) providing encouragement and support to students and families with limited access to postsecondary education (Bryan et al., 2011). However, access to school counselors' social capital may depend on a number of factors, including counselors' beliefs of students' abilities to pursue higher education (Bryan et al., 2011), student-counselor ratios (Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012), and non-counseling duties (Perera-Ditz & Mason, 2008; Rayle & Adams, 2007).

In summary, school counselors can use the ASCA National Model as a framework to help Mexican American students become academically successful (Villalba et al., 2007). School counselors also can create school-based social capital to help students pursue postsecondary educational opportunities. Given that previous research, policy statements, and best practice suggestions point to the importance of

counselor support (Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Villalba et al., 2007), exploring Mexican American adolescents' experiences with school counselors is important.

Mexican American Students' Experiences With High School Counselors

High school counselors are supposed to provide Mexican American adolescents with support, high expectations, and encouragement to pursue postsecondary education (Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Villalba et al., 2007). Accessibility to school counselors for college information, advisement, and personal counseling is also important (Martinez, 2013; Villalba et al., 2007). However, only a few researchers examined Mexican American adolescents' experiences with school counselors as well as their perceptions of support from school counselors. Vela-Gude and colleagues interviewed Latina/o college students about their experiences with high school counselors. Although most participants elaborated on negative experiences with school counselors, one participant provided examples of high expectations as well as support to reach those expectations. In another investigation, Jodry, Robles-Pina, and Nichter (2004) examined Hispanic high school students' experiences in an Advanced Placement (AP) program. Most students commented that faculty communicated high academic expectations and support. Finally, Martinez (2013) interviewed Latina/o high school seniors to explore how school counselors influenced college choices. Students indicated that school counselors provided access to college information, facilitated university representative visits, and delivered classroom lessons on postsecondary information.

Although some researchers found that Mexican American adolescents had positive experiences with school counselors, other researchers provided evidence of

Mexican American adolescents' negative experiences with school counselors (Malott, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Malott (2010) interviewed adolescents of Mexican origin to examine perceptions of strengths and challenges of their Mexican American background. Students described low expectations from school counselors as evidenced by the following comment: "They all expect you to do bad in classes and they don't pay attention to you because they all think you're going to fail anyway" (Malott, 2010, p. 16). Additionally, although accessibility to school counselors for college information, advisement, and personal counseling is an important form of support (Martinez, 2013; Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Villalba et al., 2007), Mexican-American adolescents' attempts to receive such services from school counselors have not always been positive (Chavez-Reyes, 2010; Conchas, 2001; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Given that Mexican Americans have been found to identify positive and negative experiences with school counselors, exploring the impact of students' perceptions and experiences with school counselors is important.

College-Going Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to individual beliefs regarding abilities to accomplish tasks and goals (Bandura, 1997). There is a positive relationship between self-efficacy and emotional health (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998; Solberg & Villareal, 1997; Tong & Song, 2004) and academic achievement. Researchers also found that self-efficacy was associated with anxiety (Wang & Liu, 2000) and mental illness (Hensing, Krantz, & Staland-Hyman, 2014). Although researchers explored college students' general and college self-efficacy, less attention has been given to adolescents' self-efficacy. Gibbons and Borders (2010) developed a measure to evaluate adolescents' college-

going beliefs related to attendance and persistence. In contrast to general self-efficacy, college-going beliefs focus on adolescents' confidence in their ability to attend and persist in postsecondary education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Only a few researchers have examined Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Gonzalez, Stein, and Huq (2012) examined the influence of cultural identity and perceived barriers on Latino adolescents' college-going beliefs and educational aspirations. Public ethnic regard and resilience to barriers positively related with college-going beliefs.

Purpose of the Study

Most research with Mexican American adolescents' experiences with school counselors has been qualitative (Malott, 2010; Martinez, 2013; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). While this research provided important insight, no quantitative study has examined the impact of school counselors' support on Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Given that college-going self efficacy is an important measure of preparation for college attendance and persistence (Gibbons & Borders, 2012), exploring how school counselors impact students' college-going beliefs is an important research endeavor. As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the predictive nature of school counselors' support on Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. The following research question guided the current study: To what extent do factors of school counselor support (i.e., positive regard, investment, expectations, accessibility, and appraisal) impact Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs?

Method

Participants

One-hundred thirty one students enrolled at a high school in south Texas provided data. This sample included 76 boys (58%) and 55 girls (42%) with an average age of 14.47 years ($SD = .61$) who self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican American ethnic identities. Additionally, only participants who identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican American were included in data analysis. All students self-identified their ethnic background and could have selected Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican American, or other. Students from other ethnic backgrounds (African American or Anglo) were removed from data analysis. Among participants, 70 self-identified as Mexican American (53%), 49 described themselves as Latina/o (37%), with 6 indicating a Mexican ethnic identity (5%).

Measurements

Counselor support. The Teacher Support Scale (TSS; McWhirter, 1996) measures students' perceptions of teacher support in academic activities. All participants responded to statements evaluated on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). With McWhirter's (1996) permission, students were given a similar version of the TSS where all references to "teachers" were replaced with "school counselors." This "revised" 25-item scale measures students' perceptions of high school counselors and consists of five subscales evaluating (a) investment, (b) positive regard, (c) expectations, (d) accessibility, and (e) appraisal. *Investment* refers to a student's perception of behaviors to help in future endeavors. *Positive regard* refers to a student's perception of high school counselors'

availability and emotional connection. *Expectations* relate to students' perception of high school counselors' expectations for academic achievement. *Accessibility* relates to the extent to which a student feels high school counselors are available (Metheny et al., 2008). Finally, *appraisal* refers to students' perceptions of high school counselors' evaluation of their work (McWhirter, 1996; Vela, Flamez, & Clark, 2015; Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2014).

Reliability coefficients for scores on subscales were measured in previous samples using coefficient alpha. Vela et al. (2014) examined Latina/o students' perceptions of support from school counselors and identified the following reliability coefficients: accessibility ($\alpha = .81$), expectations ($\alpha = .82$), positive regard ($\alpha = .90$), investment ($\alpha = .92$), and appraisal ($\alpha = .87$). In another investigation, Vela et al. (2015) identified strong reliability coefficients: accessible ($\alpha = .80$), expectations ($\alpha = .87$), positive regard ($\alpha = .86$), investment ($\alpha = .93$), and appraisal ($\alpha = .87$). Reliability coefficients in the present sample for scores on each subscale were sufficient: accessible ($\alpha = .78$), expectations ($\alpha = .89$), positive regard ($\alpha = .89$), investment ($\alpha = .94$), and appraisal ($\alpha = .84$).

College-Going Self-Efficacy. The College Going Self-Efficacy Scale (Gibbons & Borders, 2010) is a self-report inventory to measure individuals' confidence in pursuing college with high levels of competence. Items relate to college access and college persistence. The summation of all items is used to create a college-going self-efficacy score with higher scores reflective of higher levels of confidence. Reliability coefficients range from .94 to .97 (Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Gonzalez, Stein, & Huq, 2012). For the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Procedures

We implemented several steps to gather data in the current study. First, we obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at a university and school district in the Southern region of the United States. Second, we informed participants that participation was voluntary and participation would not affect their grade or affiliation with the university or high school. Next, we distributed a packet to participants. Finally, scores from all data were compiled, entered into a data management software program, and scores among scales were computed.

Results

Descriptive statistics, including Pearson R correlation coefficients, are included in Table 1. We used an alpha level of .05 for the current study. We examined boxplots to confirm homoscedasticity and linearity (Chandler, Balkin, & Perepiczka, 2011).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Measured Variables

Variable	M	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CGSE	94.65	17.26	131	--	.45	.49	.48	.43	.37
2. Investment	4.13	.84	131		--	.76	.88	.91	.87
3. Accessibility	3.89	.98	131			--	.71	.82	.77
4. Expectations	4.00	.78	131				--	.84	.84
5. Positive Regard	3.99	.85	131					--	.86
6. Appraisal	4.00	.89	131						--

Note: N=130. CGSE = college-going self-efficacy.

To test our hypothesis, we ran a multiple regression analysis with investment, positive regard, expectations, appraisal, and accessibility from school counselors as predictor variables (Table 2). The criterion variable was college-going beliefs. Scatterplots were

analyzed and no curvilinear relationships between the criterion variable and predictor variables were evident.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Results for College Going Self-Efficacy

Variable	B	SEB	β	t	p	sr²
Investment	4.12	4.44	.20	.93	.36	.00
Accessibility	7.55	2.34	.43	3.23	.002**	.06
Expectations	9.09	3.65	.41	2.49	.01*	.03
Positive Regard	-2.33	4.25	-.12	-.55	.58	.00
Appraisal	-7.51	3.34	-.39	-2.25	.03*	.03

Note. The squared semipartial correlation coefficient (sr²) represents the unique amount of variance.

*p < .05. ** p < .01.

There was a statistically significant relationship between predictor variables and the criterion variable, $F(5, 125) = 10.91, p < .001$, thus providing evidence that the variance in college-going self-efficacy accounted for by the predictor variables does not equal zero for the population (Dimitrov, 2013). A large effect size of $R^2 = .30$ was noted, indicating that 30% of Mexican American adolescents' differences in college-going self-efficacy are accounted for by their differences in factors measured in the current study.

After establishing the overall statistical significance of R^2 and the multiple regression equation, we examined statistical significance of the regression coefficients for significant predictors (Dimitrov, 2013). Expectations, accessibility, and appraisal had unique contributions to the explanation of variance in college-going self-efficacy.

Accessibility was the best predictor of college-going self-efficacy beliefs and uniquely accounted for 6% of the variance. Expectations from school counselors was the next variable leading the model and was a statistically significant predictor of college-going beliefs, uniquely accounting for approximately 4% of the variance. Appraisal was also a

negative and statistically significant predictor of college-going beliefs, uniquely accounting for 3% of the variance. Perceptions of investment and positive regard were not significant predictors of college-going beliefs.

Discussion

The growth of the Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a) and the dearth of quantitative studies regarding the impact of counselors' support on Mexican American adolescents' college-going self-efficacy prompted the current study. This study is important given the historical and current negative educational experiences of Mexican American adolescents (Cavazos, 2009; Malott, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Findings from the current study have potential to shape interventions and programs to improve Mexican American adolescents' college going self-efficacy. Although not all factors of school counselor support predicted college-going self-efficacy, future research could use other factors as part of a framework to examine Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs.

There were several important findings. First, several variables predicted college-going beliefs, including students' perceptions of expectations and accessibility from school counselors. These results suggest a positive relationship between (a) Mexican American adolescents who perceive higher expectations from school counselors and (b) their college-going self-efficacy. Because of the benefits of high expectations from school personnel (Cavazos, 2009; Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010), high school counselors are encouraged to understand that expectations play an important role in Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. High school counselors perhaps could also understand that students might perform at higher levels at schools in which high

expectations are communicated (Casanova, 2010). In a comprehensive study with south Texas community leaders, educators, parents, and students, Yamamura, Martinez, and Saenz (2010) examined stakeholders' perceptions regarding their roles and responsibilities in college readiness. Although stakeholders felt responsibility to help students become college-ready, college-readiness only applied to college bound or the top 15% of students. These researchers found that stakeholders placed priority on helping the other 85% of the student-population become workforce-ready. As one teacher in this study noted, "reality is that not everybody is going to go to college for four years" (p. 140). Although some Mexican American adolescents may not pursue postsecondary education, school counselors should use caution when communicating such messages to students. Depending on students' coping responses, resilience, self-efficacy, and grit, they may misinterpret such comments as lack of belief in their ability and give up on their educational goals (Martinez, 2003) or develop low college-going self-efficacy.

The extent to which students perceive their school counselors as accessible predicted college-going self-efficacy. Knowing that counselors are there to assist students in their quest for success supports students' confidence in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Students' perceptions of school counselor availability might be based on counselors' perceived expectations for success, non-counseling duties, and counselor-to-student ratios. When students do not perceive their school counselors as available, they might not seek school counselors for important information or personal counseling. In contrast, the perception that counselors are engaged in appraisal—that is, evaluating their students' objective capabilities—negatively predicted

college-going self-efficacy. This makes sense from an existential-humanistic standpoint, in which appraisal may equate with a rather impersonal, dehumanizing assessment. Since Mexican Americans tend to score lower on objective indices due to language and cultural barriers, appraisal may signal to Mexican American students that their school counselors are insensitive to their unique challenges they face in negotiating barriers to higher education. It is also possible that Mexican American adolescents may have a negative interpretation of school counselors' evaluation and feedback, thereby negatively impacting their college-going self-efficacy. Finally, perceptions of investment and positive regard from high school counselors did not influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going self-efficacy. Positive regard and investment focus on school counselors' compassion, interest, and care (McWhirter, 1996). Expectations from school counselors to pursue and succeed academically appear to be more important to influence college-going self-efficacy than positive regard and investment. Positive regard and investment may influence other factors such as self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), self-worth (Harter, 1985), social connectedness (Blum, Harris, Resnick, & Rosenwinkel, 1989), and life satisfaction (Huebner, Gilman, & Suldo, 2007).

Implications for Practice

Based on findings from the current study, there are several implications for practice. First, results indicate a positive relationship between (a) Mexican American adolescents who perceive higher expectations from school counselors and (b) their college-going self-efficacy. Therefore, an important implication for high school counselors is to foster an environment where all students perceive high expectations from school counselors. Cavazos and Cavazos (2010) encouraged high school

counselors to understand how expectations can influence Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. That is, students perform at higher levels when high expectations are effectively communicated to them (Casanova, 2010). High school counselors also can make a concerted effort to establish and maintain a college culture in which all Mexican American students are encouraged to pursue postsecondary education. Castillo and her colleagues (2010) found that Mexican American high school students expected their school to have an 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 postsecondary education. To this end, school counselors are ethically committed to advocate for rigorous college and career-readiness curriculum and have high expectations for all students (ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, 2010), particularly students from traditionally disadvantaged groups who might be subjected to low academic expectations (Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

School counselors are encouraged to find ways to become accessible and provide all Mexican American students with evaluation and appraisal in order to promote their personal, social, and career development (Studer, 2005). Previous researchers highlighted that many school counselors are consumed with non-counseling duties such as testing (Rayle & Adams, 2007), registration (McLeod, 2005), and scheduling (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008). As a result of these aforementioned duties and responsibilities, many school counselors may not have time to help all Mexican American students. Therefore, an important implication for counselor educators and school counselors involves advocacy at local, state, and national levels

(Bryan et al., 2011). Current school counselors and counselor educators can advocate to legislators to change or follow policies regarding student-to-counselor ratios. National counseling organizations also can work with legislators to prioritize funding for school counselors and recognize benefits of school counselors as well as school counseling programs (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzman, 2010). When school counselors are relieved of non-counseling duties and responsibilities, more Mexican American students will be given appraisal and other forms of services from high school counselors. The ASCA National Model (2012) provides a framework for school counseling programs in which school counselor direct student services should encompass 80% or more of school counselors' time. Adhering to the recommended school counselor to student ratio of 1 to 250 may also provide school counselors with opportunities to more effectively deliver a comprehensive school counseling program and become accessible to all students. Given the importance of the relationship between students' perception of school counselor availability and college-going self-efficacy, high school counselors' accessibility should be an important priority.

Implications for Research

This study's findings and limitations indicate that future research is warranted. First, outcome-based research with Mexican American adolescents is necessary. Researchers must evaluate interventions to increase Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs. Researchers can use a single-case research design (Lenz, 2013) to track and measure weekly interventions to increase college-going beliefs. Second, researchers should continue to explore the impact of school counselor support on other outcomes, including career-decision self-efficacy, hope, academic achievement, and

psychological grit. Third, personal interviews with Mexican American adolescents to explore perceptions of counselor support are important. In-depth interviews and focus groups could provide valuable insight into Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of how school counselor support impacts college-going beliefs. Fourth, exploring positive psychology factors and characters strengths as predictors of Mexican American adolescents' college-going beliefs is important. Potential factors include psychological grit, curiosity, meaning in life, mindfulness, gratitude, and hope. Additionally, researchers can create and validate an instrument to measure school counselor support. Although the teacher support scale used in the current study had evidence of strong reliability, future studies should investigate a school counselor support scale. Finally, research should examine cultural predictors of Mexican American students' college-going self-efficacy, including acculturation, enculturation, generation status, and language background.

Limitations

Several limitations must be taken into consideration. First, because this study relied on cross-sectional data, no cause and effect inferences can be made. Multiple regression focuses on predictive relationships and not cause and effect (Dimitrov, 2013). Second, we did not use random assignment in the current study. Third, there were several limitations with the instrument to measure school counselor support. The TSS (McWhirter, 1996) measures students' perceptions of support from *all* teachers. This instrument does not measure students' perceptions of specific individuals, thereby forcing students to generalize their experiences with school personnel (McWhirter, 1996; Metheny et al., 2008; Vela et al., 2014). As a result, this instrument does not

measure students' positive or negative experiences with multiple high school counselors (Vela, Flamez, et al., 2015). Additionally, the homogeneity of the sample and high school population might affect generalizability (Watson, 2009). All participants attended a high school with over 95% Mexican or Mexican-American population. Finally, we did not collect information about Mexican American students' language background, thereby possibly influencing responses to survey items. Although we only included English-speaking students who identified as Hispanic, Mexican, Latina/o, or Mexican American, findings could serve as a framework to study other Latina/o sub-populations (Balkin, Flamez, & Smith, 2015).

Conclusion

Findings from the current study point to the importance of exploring the impact of Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of support from high school counselors on college-going beliefs. Mexican American adolescents' school counselors can benefit their students by becoming more aware of the importance of high academic expectations as well as their accessibility for information and personal counseling. School counselors also can improve their services with Mexican American adolescents by becoming aware of their feedback regarding appraisal. In summary, school counselors must understand how Mexican American students' perceptions of expectations, appraisal, and accessibility can influence Mexican American adolescents' beliefs about college attendance and persistence.

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