

Dispelling Seven Myths Concerning Latina/o Students:

A Call to Action for School Counselors

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Abstract

Research has illustrated that school counselors *do not* provide Latina/o students with sufficient information about higher education (Immerwahr, 2003; Zalaquett, 2005), high expectations (Martinez, 2003), and individual counseling and guidance (Vela Gude et al., in press). Because school counselors are supposed to play an important role in helping Latina/o students pursue higher education (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007), the current article identifies seven myths concerning a growing Latina/o population: (1) parents do not value education, (2) students do not value education, (3) low expectations do not exist, (4) students are receiving sufficient guidance, (5) perceived ability level is the most important factor in eventual academic achievement, (6) personal barriers are more detrimental than systemic barriers, and (7) students do not have the ability to adopt a futuristic orientation. Hopefully, this article will encourage school counselors to help Latina/o students by providing quality attention and advisement, high expectations, and information about higher education.

Dispelling Seven Myths Concerning Latina/o Students:

A Call to Action for School Counselors

Latina/o students are the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007), and one fourth of students will be Latina/o by 2025 (Gregory, 2003). In addition, Latina/o students have the highest high school dropout rates (The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute and National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, 2003), 8% complete undergraduate degrees (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007), and 3.6% attain graduate degrees (U. S. Department of Education, n.d.). Because of the growing Latina/o student-population and their low academic achievement compared with other ethnic groups (e.g., 67% of Anglo students enroll in post-secondary education; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004), it is important that school counselors help Latina/o students pursue higher education. Although school counselors are in a position to promote college access for Latina/o students (Villalba et al.), research has found that many school counselors impede Latina/o students' access to higher education.

In a study of Latina/o students who left high school, Davison-Aviles, Guerrero, Barajas-Howarth, and Thomas (1999) found that some students believed school counselors had low expectations of their academic abilities. That is, some students reported that they were *facilitated out* of the K-12 school system by school counselors. Moreover, in a personal narrative of a Latino doctoral student, Herrera (2003) described an experience in which he was tracked away from higher education. The following is part of a conversation between Herrera and his high school counselor, "What if give you four choices?' I thought to myself, 'Sure, probably four choices I didn't have already.' I replied to him [school counselor] in a small, but inquisitive voice, 'O.K.' To this, he

proudly offers, 'Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines?'" (Herrera, p. 112). Furthermore, in a study with Latina/o college students, Martinez (2003) found that many students were exposed to low expectations from their high school counselors. The following is a statement from a participant in Martinez's study, "My guidance counselor, for example, felt very strongly that I should not attend any 4-year institution for that matter..." (p. 110). And finally, Vela Gude et al. (in press) also found that Latina/o college students perceived low expectations from their high school counselors. One participant offered the following perspective,

They had very low expectations of me. I had a very bad counselor because we have different high schools for different grades, and my freshmen year and sophomore year counselor, she didn't want me to take the THEA or anything like that. She was always like, "No. Why do you want to enroll in Pre-AP classes or AP?" (Vela Gude et al.)

In summary, the dominant tone of the literature investigating this domain supports the premise that school counselors underestimate many Latina/o students' academic potential.

Because of the important role that school counselors play in the academic experiences of Latina/o students (Villalba et al., 2007), it is important to provide school counselors with accurate information. Inaccurate information or false assumptions (e.g., only the top Latina/o high school students can succeed in higher education) may contribute to school counselors providing Latina/o students with low expectations and/or insufficient advisement. Furthermore, according to Eckenrod-Green and Culbreth (2007), research must minimize the factors that adversely impact the academic

experiences of Latina/o students. The current article answers this call for research by identifying seven myths: (1) parents do not value education, (2) students do not value education, (3) low expectations do not exist, (4) students are receiving sufficient guidance, (5) perceived ability level is the most important factor in eventual academic achievement, (6) personal barriers are more detrimental than systemic barriers, and (7) students do not have the ability to adopt a futuristic orientation. These myths will be dispelled with appropriate research and statistics. Latina/o students' voices will also be used to illuminate the damaging effects of low expectations and/or insufficient advisement. Following this, a discussion regarding Critical Race Theory (CRT) and institutional racism is presented. And finally, implications for school counselors are provided and recommendations for research are offered.

Seven Prevalent Myths

Myth 1. Parents do not value education.

Although Latina/o parents may not know what is involved in the college application process (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, in press; Zalaquett, 2005), research has found that parents understand the significance of education. In fact, Latina/o parents provide words of encouragement and unconditional support to help their children pursue a college degree (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al.; Martinez, 2003; Zalaquett).

Myth 2. Students do not value education.

Latina/o students care about education (Zalaquett, 2005). In his study of high achieving Latina/o college students, Zalaquett found that each participant understood the importance of education. That is, all participants reported that education was

important to success. However, according to Zalaquett, “Many educators still believe Latina/o children are not interested in education or are incapable of succeeding in an academic setting and assume these are the reasons why they drop out from school” (p. 36). Although research has illustrated that Latina/o students value education, educators continue to hold a negative and deficit view of Latina/o students (Marx, 2008; Zalquett & Feliciano, 2004).

Myth 3. Low expectations do not exist.

Many Latina/o students continue to perceive low expectations from important school personnel, such as counselors and teachers. For example, Zalaquett and Feliciano (2004) found that educators believe Latina/o students do not have the potential to pursue higher education. One teacher provided the following comment, “You have to lower the standards for those kids [Latina/o] to pass these examinations” (Zalaquett & Feliciano, p. 8). Moreover, comments such as, “They are not college material,” and “They are not interested in education” (Zalaquett & Feliciano, p. 8) are still used by teachers, suggesting that many Latina/o students are labeled as not having the ability to attain a college degree.

Myth 4. Students are receiving sufficient guidance.

Many Latina/o students leave high school with insufficient guidance and advisement (Immerwahr, 2003; Kimura-Walsh et al., in press; Vela Gude et al., in press; Zalaquett, 2005). In a study of Latina/o high school seniors, Immerwahr found that some students were not given information regarding higher education. One high school student provided the following account of her experience during a university tour,

My high school took some of us up there last February, and I was worried about whether or not I could apply still, and I discussed it with the tour guide. It was a random question and he explained it. Because it is a state college they give you time to decide, so you can apply in the fall or at the end of summer. (Immerwahr, p. 5)

However, Immerwahr found that the deadline was July 1st, which means that this student did not receive the correct information from her school counselors or teachers. In addition, a Latina participant from Zalaquett's study provided the following perspective about the effects of leaving high school with insufficient information,

I wish I would have been educated about the intricacies of college admissions and preparation. I ended up not attending the 1st year because I couldn't complete all the required paperwork and didn't know that I qualify for a scholarship. (p. 39)

Although school counselors are *supposed* to provide guidance about higher education (Villalba et al., 2007), many school counselors have not answered this call to action, thus leaving Latina/o students to navigate the pathway to higher education with insufficient information.

Myth 5. Perceived ability level is the most important factor in academic achievement.

A combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors is important in Latina/o students' eventual academic achievement. Zalaquett (2005) found the following factors vital in the academic success of Latina/o college students: familial support, high value of education, and responsibility toward siblings. Additionally, Ceballo (2004) interviewed 10 Latina/o college students and found the following factors important in their high

academic achievement: parents' emphasis on higher education, nonverbal support from parents for higher education, and the importance of mentors and role-models.

Furthermore, in a study of Latina/o individuals who attained professional degrees, many cited perseverance and hard work as the salient factors in their high academic achievement (Gandara, 1995). In summary, it appears that hard work, effort, and family support may be more important than perceived ability level.

Myth 6. Personal barriers are more detrimental than systemic barriers.

Curriculum tracking is based on perceived ability levels (Valencia, 2002) and often involves discouraging Latina/o students from higher education (Nora, 2003). In a study of 50 Latinas/os who attained advanced degrees, Gandara (1995) highlighted the distinction between the college-preparatory track and non-college-preparatory track. The following is part of a statement from a Latina student who was in the non-college-preparatory track, "And I told him [school counselor] I would like to go to college and could he fit me into college-prep classes...And he looked at my grades and everything, and said, well, he wasn't sure I could handle it..." (Gandara, p. 61). Although educators contend that tracking no longer exists in K-12 schools, tracking is still used to push Latina/o students away from higher education and into other fields (e.g., military; Herrera, 2003). In summary, systemic barriers (e.g., tracking) may be more detrimental than personal obstacles since it may be easier to change negative study habits than to change a system of low expectations, insufficient advisement, and/or tracking.

Myth 7. Students do not have the ability to adopt a futuristic orientation.

Many Latina/o students engage in goal setting and plan for the future. In a study of four Latina/o high school students who were below grade-level expectations at one

point in their academic careers, Hassinger and Plourde (2005) found that all students had high goals about the future. That is, each participant wanted to pursue higher education. Moreover, in a study with 98 Latina/o college students, Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) found that most students wanted to pursue an advanced degree (e.g., PhD). Although administrators assert that Latina/o students have a “live for today” mentality (as cited in Studer, 2005), research has illustrated that Latina/o students plan for the future.

Discussion

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that can be used to look at institutional policies and practices that prevent Latina/o students from receiving quality education (Villalpando, 2004). CRT focuses on racism, social justice, experiential knowledge, and historical context. First, an examination of racism involves recognizing that although blatant acts of racism are less acceptable than in the past, subtle acts of racism, such as tracking and low expectations, are still common in K-12 schools (Cavazos, 2008; Immerwahr, 2003). Second, social justice involves methods of helping students outside of personal counseling. In the school counseling literature, social justice involves shaping and reforming policy that adversely affect minority students (e.g., Latina/o) who have been oppressed by school policies. Third, experiential knowledge includes looking at and valuing Latina/o students’ personal experiences. Although some educators blame Latina/o students and their parents for low academic achievement (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006; Zalaquett, 2005), it is important to adopt a strength based approach and value what Latina/o students bring to the classroom, such as their personal and family experiences (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). And finally, the historical component of CRT

includes an examination of historical practices and policies that have prevented Latina/o students from receiving a quality education. It is important that school counselors understand the history of limited access to higher education for Latina/o students (Villalpando).

Drawing from CRT to examine school experiences of Latina/o students, it can be inferred that *institutional racism* is still prevalent. For example, it is well-documented that Latina/o students are often viewed from a culturally deficit perspective in the literature (Quiada & Alvarez, 2006); that is, Latina/o students and their parents are blamed for the achievement gap between Latina/o students and their non-minority peers. Teachers and school counselors also adopt a deficit approach and communicate low expectations to Latina/o students (Marx, 2008; Vela Gude et al., in press; Warren, 2002). Because of low expectations and/or placement in a non-college preparatory track, Latina/o students have less access to advanced placement courses (Contreras, 2005; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004), quality advisement from school counselors (Vela Gude et al.), college information (Immerwahr, 2003), teachers with high expectations, and teachers who value Latina/o culture (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). In addition, lack of aforementioned services often results in less preparation for higher education, uninformed or misinformed about post-secondary educational opportunities (Immerwahr), and internalization of low expectations (Martinez, 2003). In summary, although educators contend that Latina/o students have the same opportunity to receive a quality education as their White student counterparts, institutional racism is still alive, thus preventing Latina/o students from being prepared for post-secondary education.

Implications for School Counselors

Based on an overview of the current literature and the seven myths identified in the current article, there are a number of implications for practice. First, since many Latina/o parents did not attend college (Immerwahr, 2003), it is important that school counselors inform students about post-secondary educational opportunities. Lack of information is a barrier that prevents Latina/o students from enrolling in higher education (Immerwahr; Vela Gude et al., in press; Zalaquett, 2005), so school counselors must provide information about scholarships, admission requirements, and financial aid. Although well educated parents provide their children with sufficient information about higher education, many Latina/o children may not be given such an opportunity (Zalaquett). This does not mean that Latina/o parents do not care or value their child's education; instead, parents are not aware of application requirements and other pertinent information about higher education (Zalaquett). Therefore, it is vital that school counselors fill this gap by providing information about higher education.

It is also important that school counselors believe that all Latina/o students can succeed in higher education. Research has *clearly* illustrated that there is not a clear path to high academic achievement; that is, Latina/o students who were exposed to low expectations, placed in a non-college preparatory track, or were not expected to attend college, have succeeded in higher education (e.g., Herrera, 2003; Martinez, 2003; Vela Gude et al., in press). Therefore, if school counselors do not know who will succeed and who will not, high expectations should be communicated to all Latina/o students. In addition, the authors from the current article advocate for stronger programs at the elementary level that focuses on helping Latina/o students gain access to higher

education. It is simple to say that *high school* counselors should help Latina/o students enroll in post-secondary education by communicating high expectations and providing information about educational opportunities. However, elementary school counselors must also promote higher education as children are heavily influenced by adult role-models (e.g., teachers) at this age. And finally, it is well documented that many Latina/o adolescents engage in dangerous behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use (Finn, 2006) and unprotected sexual intercourse (Upchurch, Aneshensel, Mudgal, & McNeely, 2001). Although research has not found a clear link between dangerous behaviors and career goals, junior high school counselors could help Latina/o students develop clear goals about the future. For example, if a Latino student wants to pursue college in order to obtain a degree in Engineering and he formulates a plan to reach this goal, then it is highly possible that he would stop engaging in dangerous behaviors since he would have something to work toward. In summary, school counselors are in a position to help Latina/o students develop clear goals about the future and help them understand how dangerous behaviors (e.g., drug use) could prevent goal attainment.

Schools in the United States have traditionally promoted White middle-class ideals and practices (Lee, 2001). For example, most teachers come from White-middle class backgrounds (Whitebook, 2003), and most school counselors are trained in graduate programs deeply rooted in European middle class culture (Lee). Therefore, educators continue to promote White norms in the classroom (Marri, 2005), and students whose backgrounds are aligned with Eurocentric norms benefit from this practice, while students who come from diverse cultures and backgrounds do not. When teachers and school counselors promote a monolithic culture within their classrooms

and schools, the result is often cultural discontinuity for culturally diverse students, including Latina/o students (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). Cultural discontinuity is defined as “A cultural disconnection between children’s home environment and that of the school...” (p. 10). Some effects of cultural discontinuity include (a) psychological distress, (b) negative self-evaluations (Garcia, 1993), (c) internalization of negative messages regarding one’s culture and ethnic group, (d) low self-esteem, (e) family conflicts (Villalba et al., 2007), or (f) low academic achievement (Cholewa & West-Olatunji). Although some educators would like culturally diverse students to acculturate to the dominant culture (Villalba et al.), recent attention has focused on the importance of making the system respond to students. In other words, instead of helping students acculturate to the system, school counselors should try to help the system accommodate to the students (Lee).

There are a number of ways in which schools counselors can help Latina/o students transition from their home culture to the school culture. However, before any effective intervention can be made, school counselors must examine and reflect on their own biases toward this student-population. First, school counselors can value and capitalize on what students bring to the classroom, including family and personal experiences (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). Instead of seeing culture as a deficit, school counselors can look through a different lens to understand the positive aspects of Latina/o culture, such as family, religion, and togetherness. Once school counselors respect and appreciate the Latina/o culture, they can use cultural practices as way to help Latina/o students improve personally and academically. Second, school counselors

can consult with teachers to promote culturally responsive teaching (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008).

As previously mentioned, classrooms are deeply rooted in monolithic norms and practices, which creates discontinuity for Latina/o students. Therefore, school counselors can use workshops and/or trainings to talk to teachers about the importance of using culturally responsive practices. Such practices include the following: (a) creating culturally responsive lesson plans, (b) informing teachers about the detrimental effects of using only Eurocentric practices, and (c) promoting the use of personal experiences in classroom assignments (Cholewa & West-Olatunji). Third, since many Latina/o students' voices are invalidated by school personnel (e.g., teachers), school counselors can use individual counseling to provide a safe environment in which students can talk about their experiences. If Latina/o students do not feel like their culture is respected in the classroom, school counselors can help Latina/o students feel validated via individual counseling (Lee, 2001). And finally, school counselors can use systemic interventions to advocate for a positive school environment in which Latina/o students have an opportunity to excel academically (Cholewa & West-Olatunji). For example, school counselors can make sure "the school has a curriculum that is neither Eurocentric nor Afrocentric nor Asiancentric, but rather is Centered (i.e., it has a curriculum that fairly and accurately reflects the contributions of many cultures)" (Cholew & West-Olatunji, p. 56).

Conclusion

Since the current article highlights research of Latina/o students who were academically successful, school counselors may argue that this research is not

representative of all Latina/o students. School counselors may claim that low achieving Latina/o students do not care about education or lack the ability to set goals for the future. It is important to mention that the research cited in the current article included Latina/o students who were (a) tracked away from higher education (Gandara, 1995), (b) exposed to low expectations (Martinez, 2003; Vela Gude et al., in press; Zalaquett, 2005), or (c) performing below grade-level expectations at some point in their academic careers (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005). Despite barriers, these students found a way to succeed in higher education. In other words, school counselors and teachers were wrong about these Latina/o students' academic potential.

The authors from the current article encourage school counselors to uncover Latina/o students' hidden potential (i.e., resiliency) that may not be evident due to low test scores or placement in a non-college preparatory track. School counselors could provide their Latina/o students with written reflective assignments, which may provide students with an opportunity to learn about their resiliency (i.e., what helped them overcome obstacles or challenges). Also, future research must focus on future and current school counselors' perceptions of barriers that prevent Latina/o students from enrolling in higher education. This line of research could provide insight into insufficient advisement and low expectations. For example, in a study of admissions criteria of school counseling graduate programs, Stone and Hanson (2002) stated,

...[school counseling] applicants who are less aware of how school counselors can exercise advocacy always talk in terms of how the student and his or her family are the problem and never mention how schools can have an impact on student achievement. (p. 185)

Both quantitative and qualitative studies are necessary to determine if school counselors mention (a) students; (b) parents; or (c) the school system; as reasons contributing to Latina/o students' low academic achievement. If school counselors do not mention the system, then this removes their responsibility in reducing the achievement gap between Latina/o students and their non-minority peers (Quijada & Alvarez, 2006).

Future research could also examine the following questions: (a) What influences school counselors' beliefs toward Latina/o students? (b) Why do Latina/o students continue to leave high school with insufficient advisement and college information? and (c) Are school counseling training programs preparing counselors to help Latina/o students overcome barriers to higher education? It is unclear why Latina/o students leave high school with insufficient information about higher education (Immerwahr, 2003; Vela Gude et al., in press; Zalaquett, 2005). However, it is possible that school counselors do not think that Latina/o students (a) want to attend college or (b) possess the desire and ability to pursue a college degree. It is also possible that school counselors do not believe their role includes helping students pursue higher education (Cavazos, Alvarado, Rodriguez, & Iruegas, 2008).

It is important to mention that two of the Latina/o authors from the current article did not graduate in the top ten percent of their high school graduating class. The lead author will apply to doctoral programs in the fall semester of 2009, and the second author received a full fellowship to pursue a doctoral degree at Texas Christian University. This should illustrate that (a) there is not a clear path to high academic achievement and (b) all Latina/o students must be given high expectations (White

House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2003). Hopefully, the current article will help school counselors understand that Latina/o students can pursue and succeed in higher education.

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Author Note

Javier Cavazos Jr. is a graduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American. He graduated with a Masters in Guidance and Counseling in December 2008. He works as a research assistant in the department of Educational Psychology. In addition, he was a member of g-force, an organization designed to help students pursue higher education. He traveled to high schools in South Texas to talk to students about the importance of higher education. During this experience he was appalled to learn what teachers thought about their Latina/o students; that is, teachers believed that many Latina/o students did not have the ability to pursue higher education. Based on this experience he formulated the following research interests: resiliency among Latina/o students, helping Latina/o students overcome barriers to higher education, and coping methods used by successful Latina/o students. Javier has published 5 peer reviewed journal articles with professors and students from UT-Pan American, and he has presented at 21 national, state, or local conferences. He will begin doctoral studies in fall 2009. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Javier Cavazos Jr., 2327 North First, Harlingen, Texas 78550, (956) 357-4550, (956) 381-2395, Ljcavazos@broncs.utpa.edu

Alyssa Cavazos is a doctoral student at Texas Christian University. Her education began as an undergraduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American where she completed her Bachelor and Masters degrees in English. In addition to teaching undergraduate courses at UT-Pan American, Alyssa served as an assistant to a professor and graded literature essays. She also worked as a writing tutor at her university's writing center. Although Alyssa is committed to teaching and helping

students with writing, she also has a passion for research. Her research interests include helping Latina/o students overcome low expectations, focusing on multilingual learners in first year composition, responding to students' writing, and writing assessment. At 24 years old Alyssa has already presented at 7 national and state conferences. She has also published 2 peer reviewed journal articles. Following completion of her doctoral degree, Alyssa would like to return to UTPA and become a professor.

Maria Hinojosa is an undergraduate student at UT-Pan American. She will graduate with a Bachelors degree in Education in May 2009. As an undergraduate student, Maria is actively involved in campus life in which she serves as an officer in several student organizations. Due to her involvement in student-life, she has received numerous awards, including Outstanding Student Leader during Student Leadership Week. Maria's research interests include policy changes to help Latina/o students pursue higher education, insufficient services from high school counselors, and Latina/o educational advancement. She is interested in this line of research due to her personal experience with her high school counselors and teachers. Maria will apply to graduate programs in Educational Leadership and possibly pursue a PhD in the future. Her ultimate goal includes formulating policies that will help more Latina/o students pursue and succeed in higher education. She currently lives in Donna, Texas with her family.

Marcos Silva is an undergraduate student at UT-Pan American. His major is Psychology. Due to his passion for helping students, Marcos successfully ran for student body president at his university. In only his fourth month in office he has already implemented university-wide changes that benefits students. In addition, Marcos sought

out professors and graduate students to become involved in research projects. He was fortunate to have had positive experiences with his high school counselors, but he understands that other students may not be as fortunate. His ultimate goals include obtaining a graduate degree in Psychology and working with children. He currently lives in McAllen, Texas.

The authors wish to dedicate this article to Latina/o students who are exposed to low expectations, insufficient advisement, and lack of college information.