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Author(s): Nena Torrez

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Developing Parent Information Frameworks that Support College Preparation for Latino Students

Nena Torrez
California State University, San Bernardino

Latino parents trust a secondary school system that often misclassifies and misdirects their children. Survey results from three high school sites indicate that Latino parents trust that the school is doing what is best for their children, and they do not understand the importance of being an advocate for their children. Important curriculum decisions are being made for Latino students without informing their parents. Rather than pointing to a lack of expectations on the part of the parents, it would be more fruitful to consider what is happening to the students inside the school setting.

The Need for a Survey of Latino Parents

Research suggests that the growing achievement gap between Latinos and other groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), and their low college-going rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), are largely attributable to their placement in classes that do not meet the criteria for admission to four-year colleges and universities. However, it is often believed that the real problem is that Latino parents are not advocates for their children at the school site (Flores, Tefft, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991; Poplin & Weeres, 1992). There is a general misconception that Latino parents have a distinct lack of expectation that their children will go to college. Contributing to this misconception is the release of a report by President Bush's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans issued in April, 2003. The report points out that while Hispanics are now the largest minority in the United States one third have dropped out of high school, and of those graduating from high school, only half pursue a college education (compared with 66 percent for non-Hispanic Whites). In addition, only 10 percent of Hispanic Americans graduate from four-year colleges and universities (Olson, 2003). Research suggests that part of the problem could stem from the lack of parental understanding of how high schools classify students for college preparation. In addition, there may be little understanding of the need for Hispanic parents to become actively engaged in advocacy roles for their children's curricular paths at the school site.

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It is becoming increasingly evident that such misclassification problems could well have been a part of the Houston School District's success in raising the achievement scores, which has since become the model for the No Child Left Behind program (U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). There is also an underlying assumption that the provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act provide the essential answer to school achievement problems. When the state of Texas bestowed an exemplary status on Austin High School in August 2002, administrators were praised. There were more accolades when a private foundation honored Houston for having the nation's best urban school district. Just a year later, that same high school had been downgraded to low-performing, the lowest possible rating. In addition, the Houston Independent School District – which President Bush has touted as a model for the rest of the nation -- is currently warding off accusations that it inflated its achievements by reclassifying its students, many of whom were Latino high school students (Dobbs, 2003; Schemo, 2003).

As a result of ongoing concerns about the education of Latino students, I developed an original survey. My main goal was to gather feedback from Latino parents in order to ascertain what they knew about the different curriculum choices for their children, and to understand their expectations for their children's postsecondary education. There is a modest body of research concerning effective parent advocacy or parent involvement strategies for Latino students and their families (Inger, 1992; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Parker, Bigger, Hasbrouck, & Parker, 1996). One interesting study in this vein, suggesting an extension of these current research results, (Clark, 1988) investigates the effective practices of Hispanics in higher achieving families. Consequently, one of my goals through the current study is to increase the existing body of research.

Methodology

The survey (see Appendix A) was administered to the parents of high school seniors at three different high schools in Southern California. The survey was particularly aimed at identifying the information available in middle school and high school for the parents of Latino children to

take adequate steps to ensure that their children's eighth and ninth grade educational experiences would prepare them for entrance into a four-year college or university in California. All of the parents who responded were either Mexican immigrants or Mexican Americans. Ninety-two Latino parents completed surveys (with sample sizes of 27, 32, and 33 for each of the three high school sites). There was a 30 percent response rate overall. Any partial surveys were not included.

The three high schools from which these students were drawn have a high percentage of Latino students. The sample was sufficiently large across three high schools in Southern California, all three together having about 59 percent Hispanic students, 15 percent African American, 20 percent non-Hispanic White, and 6 percent Asian and other students. I sampled only Latino parents of seniors at the high schools who described themselves as Mexican, or Mexican-American. The survey was restricted to pre-screened high school seniors who had been in the same school district since at least their middle/junior high school enrollment and had Latino parents. Given the large number of such students at each school site, this prerequisite was not difficult to meet. Based on sample techniques the assertion is made that these data are representative of the majority of Latino/Mexican parents in California.

An Analysis of Variance test was done to ensure that the results did not differ significantly among the three high schools. For example, the question on frequency of parent participation at the high school site was tested under the hypothesis that the frequency of parent participation at the school site (mean number of visits) was no different for Latino parents at all three high schools surveyed. With an alpha level of .05, I tested whether the mean level of parent participation was significantly different among the three school sites and found that it was not significantly different, $F(3, 92) = 3.84, p = .23$. Also, t-tests were performed, which cross-validated the fact that sample proportions, for responses across the school sites were the same. This generates some confidence that the results apply to many Latino high school students in California public schools.

Results

Lack of Sufficient Information for Latino Parents to Evaluate Adequate Academic Preparation for College

The achievement gap, in terms of low college-going rates for Latinos, was particularly acute at all three high schools. Though non-Hispanic White students were in the minority at these schools, about one-half of the seniors met eligibility for the California State University (CSU) system, whereas only one-third of the Latinos met the CSU eligibility. A big part of the puzzle here involves the fact that most parents did not know what college preparatory courses their children needed in grades 9-12, to meet admission requirements to the four-year institutions. In fact, 30 percent stated they did not know whether a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score was an important factor in obtaining admission or financial aid. Of those, 41 percent of Latino parents indicated that they were acquainted with the SAT, but only about 1 out of 10 had knowledge of whether an SAT score could exceed 1000. Only 4 percent stated that they were aware of SAT preparation classes that had been offered at the high school sites.

The responses also indicated that most of the parents did not know how differences in course placement are directly related to the entrance requirements for college. Most of the parents did not know about the California high school A through F courses (college preparatory curriculum requirements). In fact, only 8 percent were actually aware of the State of California A-F requirements, which spell out the college preparatory courses needed to gain admittance to four-year colleges and universities.

Approximately three-quarters of the Latino parents considered a four-year college/university education to be important for their child. The survey was conducted in March-April, and yet only 10 percent reported having a student who was in the process of actively enrolling in a four-year institution of higher education. None of the parents of seniors reported that they expected their children to be enrolled at a University of California school (where typically the top 10 percent of all high school students are enrolled). Of the 28 percent that had plans

to go to school the following fall, most reported that their children planned to enroll at a community college.

Another finding was that many parents were under the impression that their children were being prepared for college when, in fact, their children were placed in a high school curriculum that did not meet the prerequisites required for entrance into California's four-year colleges. Most troubling was the fact that 92 percent of the parents had never discussed their children's curriculum assignments with a middle school, or high school counselor, and did not know what criteria were actually used to place their children in one of the curriculum placement categories presented (Vocational, Basic or Regular, College Preparatory, Honors/GATE). While 40 percent reported periodic contact with school faculty and/or counselors, they were not generally getting information about specific curricula within a category, or discussing curricular placement criteria or decisions.

Based on the survey results, most of the Latino parents (75 percent) had a strong desire to see their children graduate from high school and go on to a college or university. Despite these high expectations, the parents surveyed were typically unaware of the academic and financial inputs needed in order for them to be advocates for their children at the middle school and high school levels.

In short, in most cases, parents could not describe in appropriate detail the quality of the education their children received, and most were not knowledgeable about the curriculum, and other requirements for enrolling in the University of California system, or in the California State University System for the upcoming fall term. In general, the results did not differ significantly among the three high schools surveyed. This lack of knowledge might be at the core of the widespread belief that Latino parents "don't care" about their children's education. In contrast, the survey results show that most Latino parents do communicate high expectations to their children and trust that the students are being properly prepared and advised about their academic program.

They have very limited information about what it takes for their children to meet university entrance requirements. Their comments indicate that Latino parents would welcome several modes of education and avenues for advocacy to promote their students' access to established four-year colleges/universities. Moreover, the results indicate that most parents understand the importance of education, but do not have the tools necessary to ask the right questions, let alone choose what is the best curriculum or the best school for their children. Having schools with choice assumes that parents are fully informed about the choices they are making. These results indicate exactly the opposite. Schooling is not only a public good, with all the attendant problems that implies, but it is also important to note that it is not a transparent good. In a sense, there is a corollary to this problem in the private sector. Recently, some of the most high-profile companies in America have been accused of falsifying and misleading financial statements. In education, just like commerce, it is doubtful that standard accounting practices will really help consumers of education make intelligent choices for their children.

Therefore, the evidence substantiates that most Latino parents are not aware, or actively engaged in the choice of their child's college preparatory curriculum, though adequate opportunities may be available and their child may meet the criteria for being enrolled in college preparation classes. Part of the problem here may lie in the fact that the structure of the school systems in Mexico is different from that of California public schools. Given their ignorance of the system, parents tend to rely on the decisions made by school faculty and counselors. It is easy to confuse this lack of participation with apathy on the part of the parents. But these results tend to discredit such a shallow interpretation.

The truth is that most Latino parents are not involved in the curriculum choices for their children at the middle school and high school. Open ended comments indicate a number of different reasons for lack of parental involvement, such as low levels of English proficiency, little understanding that they should be proac-

tive in advocating for their child's curriculum placement, little knowledge of how the school system operates, work schedule demands, negative experiences with schools, a lack of sensitivity of school personnel, and a general ignorance of the relationship between school and home environments.

In general, the more familiar the parents were with the four-year college and university environment, the more successful the academic preparation of their students for college. Familiarity with the actual college environment was measured by the parent's educational background, as well as a question involving the educational attainment of older siblings. This relationship has, of course, been well documented. In addition, it is more important to see that this survey provides added support for the fact that many Latino parents, regardless of their income level, want to become more actively involved in the education of their children.

The reasons for the lack of interaction at the middle school and high school level seemed to have more to do with negative experiences as the level of school completed by the student increased. I asked the Latino parents about their level of involvement at each stage of their children's education (K-5th/6th, middle or junior high school, and high school). The level of parental involvement at the three educational levels, after being rated individually, was followed by a space on the survey form for open-ended comments concerning reasons for lack of parent participation. The reasons given by parents correspond to the recent research on why Hispanic parents are typically not involved in their children's education (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996). It is particularly interesting to note that negative experiences and lack of connectedness to the school administrators, faculty, and staff were more pronounced at the higher grade levels than at the lower grade levels. The reader should keep in mind that respondents were pre-screened to ascertain that surveys only went out to parents if they had a high school senior that had been going to school in the same school district since 6th grade. It was felt this was necessary to ensure that the responses to the questions about school environments were assessing the same school district setting in

which the student had begun or spent numerous years of his/her school education. Otherwise, I ran the risk that parents were giving answers about high school situations that described out of state high schools, or even pertaining to educational settings in Mexico.

These results also suggest the existence of a telling dichotomy between students whose parents or siblings have already gone to four-year colleges. Perhaps they have developed strategies and advocacy routes that could be used, like a “road map” for other Hispanic parents. This analysis could be particularly fruitful as an extension of the open ended suggestions that parents gave when asked to make suggestions on what could be done to improve their knowledge of academic requirements for the admission of their children to four-year colleges and universities.

Strategies to Encourage Information Access and Supportive Parental Advocacy

One of the final survey items was designed to elicit an open-ended response concerning what the middle schools and high schools could have done to help Latino children succeed in pursuing a degree at a four-year college/university. It is important to note that parents whose children were more successful at meeting eligibility requirements, tended to have a clear and direct response to these open ended items. In a sense, this suggests that unsuccessful students have parents who, although they are highly motivated to see their children succeed academically, do not know what types of interventions are necessary. This survey was not designed to statistically test such a hypothesis. Nevertheless, this is an important causal observation from the open-ended responses at the end of the survey document (see Appendix A). This points to the conclusion that the best place to find educational strategies concerning the academic success of Latinos, is among the parents of successful Latinos already at the existing high schools. This suggests a strategy slightly different from the No Child Left Behind Act. The data here suggest that some Latino parents are effectively pursuing their academic goals at the existing school sites by implementing familiar strategies with respect to being advocates for their children. Such suggestions made for ensuring aca-

demically progress toward going to a four-year institution imply that parents desire more information about requirements for college. In some cases, parents reported finding out about opportunities missed after their children had transferred to a four-year college from a community college setting, or after they themselves had begun to take some college courses. This, however, was not a systemic result, but surfaced from a few selected open-ended survey comments. In addition to an interest in informational workshops, parents expressed a willingness to talk with counselors about the implications and direction of their children’s coursework as it relates to fulfilling academic requirements for college. They also indicated that they were not aware of any opportunities to speak with counselors about such issues. Some Latino parents expressed an interest in obtaining information about college preparation in Spanish (instead of English), and in a short format that they could easily understand.

The parents made open-ended comments, which listed some very practical suggestions. They indicated that they would be desirous of parent workshops to gather information concerning curriculum requirements, SAT preparation courses, and availability of financial aid. Many parents indicated a distinct disconnect regarding accessibility to such information at the middle school level. This leads one to the conclusion that if such remedies were pursued, Latino parents would exploit these new avenues to become advocates for improving the quality of their children’s education at the school site. Another inescapable conclusion is that it is the actual curriculum choices within the school, rather than the choice to move to a different school that motivates parents of successful Latino students. Even at a school that has poor overall academic performance for Latino students, some Latino parents seem to somehow advocate and navigate a successful path for completion of college preparation courses for their children.

Discussion

An initial attempt has been made to dispel the notion that Latino parents do not have the expectation that their children will go to college. Furthermore, the survey establishes that

many Latino parents do not understand the importance of being an advocate in guiding their children through a high school curriculum that would be necessary to ensure their children's eligibility for college entrance. Survey results established that parents with higher than average participation at the high school site, were more successful at navigating a curriculum that put their children into a four-year institution. In addition, it was evident that the vast majority of parents, whose students were not going to enter college, correspondingly had little understanding of the fact that their children had to be enrolled in specific classes (A through F curriculum requirements) in order to be eligible for college. Many students were placed in curriculum tracks, which would make it less likely they would go to college, and there was little communication between the school site and the parents that these critical curriculum choices had been made for their children. This distinct lack of communication is an underlying cause of lower college-going rates for many Latino students.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The main limitation was that it relied on a non-random sample. A second limitation was that it was based on an overall small sample size and only a small percentage of parents at each of the three school sites completed surveys. For these reasons, additional related research is needed, using larger sample sizes and using random samples. Moreover, in the future, it would be desirable to get more detailed information from the parent respondents. Finally, additional research is needed to verify the suspicion that many of these students are capable of going to college, but are not eligible because of curriculum choices that parents are not aware of, and would not approve of for their children.

Conclusion

There has been a great deal of debate concerning the best ways to academically prepare Latino students in elementary school. Much of the focus has been on Limited English Proficient (LEP) students who comprise 20 percent of elementary school students in California. It is common for schools with heavy concentrations of Hispanic/Latino students to

have 40 percent LEP students in elementary grades. More than 40 percent of such LEP students are immigrants. In California, over 80 percent of these students are Spanish speakers, most of whom are of Mexican ancestry. The involvement of language minority parents in their children's education is crucial to their children's academic development. This study, in general, found just the opposite. The results suggest that barriers to communication with Latino parents could be more important than any lack of expectation that Latino parents have for their children, in terms of the expectation that their children are getting an education that will give them access to college. Many parents expressed dismay when they found that their children could be placed in curriculum tracks that made entrance to college less likely.

The suggestions from the parents that surfaced in this study could be used as a starting point for improving the problems that surfaced in this study. Such information would seem to be an affordable way to increase the potential pool of Latino college applicants in the future. This also brings into question whether it is the academic preparedness of Latino students, or whether there exists a deficiency in the counseling the students are getting. Bad counseling along with greater parent advocacy are significant factors in low college-going rates for Latinos. This survey design, however, was not aimed directly at doing such an evaluation, but it does raise an interesting possibility for future research. It suggests that the reallocation of resources, a more costly proposition of the No Child Left Behind act may not be as effective as a cheaper, but more effective policy of information acquisition on the part of Latino parents who do not need to be sold on the value of a college degree for their children's future success in the labor market.

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Appendix A:

Latino Parent Survey

This survey will ask you to evaluate information about the educational experience of your high school senior. None of the individual answers will be given to school administrators, and your participation in the survey is to be kept anonymous. No school personnel will see the individual surveys, or be given information as to which parents have participated in this survey. If you erroneously received an English or Spanish survey form, or wish to be interviewed to collect this information, please write your name and phone number on this form so we can collect the information from you.

1. Did you graduate from secondary school/high school? a) yes b) no
If you answered "yes," did you graduate in
a) California b) Another State in the U.S. c) Mexico
2. How important do you feel it is for your child to attend college?
a) Not Important b) Somewhat Important c) Very Important
3. To what extent did your child's **middle school provide general information** about the requirements for four-year university eligibility?
a) Very much information b) Some information c) none d) I do not know
4. To what extent did your child's **high school provide general information** about the requirements for four-year university eligibility?
a) Very much information b) Some information c) none d) I do not know
5. Have you ever been offered an opportunity to discuss the academic/vocational curriculum placement of your student with a middle school counselor?
a) often b) once or twice c) never
6. Have you ever been offered an opportunity to discuss the academic/vocational curriculum placement of your student with a high school teacher or counselor?
a) often b) once or twice c) never

7. Can you classify your student's academic curriculum in one of the following Categories? a) yes b) no
If yes, indicate track:
a) Vocational b) Basic d) College Preparatory e) Honors/GATE or AP
8. Do you have information about the A through F requirements for college preparation course-work, or information for students, by grade-level, required in Mathematics and English for entrance requirements to four-year colleges and universities?
a) yes b) no
9. Indicate whether you have taken any coursework in higher education institutions:
a) trade or vocational programs (public or private)
b) some community college
c) some four-year college
d) completion of undergraduate degree
e) Graduate schooling
10. Indicate whether your high school senior has a brother or sister who has taken any course-work in higher education institutions:
f) trade or vocational programs (public or private)
g) some community college
h) some four-year college
i) completion of undergraduate degree
j) Graduate schooling
11. How would you rate the frequency of your overall participation, visiting the school site as a parent/guardian in your child's middle/junior and high school education (regarding home-work, meeting with teachers, counselors attending school functions, etc.)?
a) 5 or more times per year
b) 3 or 4 times per year
c) 1 or 2 times per year
d) never
12. Do you characterize yourself as being:
a) Mexican-American b) Mexican c) other, explain:
13. The household gross taxable income last year was:
a) \$25,000 or below b) above \$25,000 but below 40,000 c) \$40,000 or more
14. How many years has your family lived in California?
15. How many brothers and sisters are in your high school senior's immediate family.
16. Has the middle school or high school provided you with information to determine if your child qualifies for financial assistance to go to college?
a) information is available b) no information is provided c) I do not know
17. Is information provided to parents about the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)?
a) yes b) no
18. Has your child taken the SAT test? a) yes b) no c) I do not know?
19. 1000 is a very high score for an SAT test?
a) true b) false
20. The SAT is not required to be admitted to the University of California?
a) true b) false

21. SAT preparation courses have been available for students at my child's high school: a) yes b) no
22. My senior is already accepted, or is planning to go to one of the following in the next year:
 - a) University of California
 - b) California State University
 - c) Community College (Transfer or Occupational Training)
 - d) Trade or Technical Training
 - e) No plans for such schooling (mentioned above)

If your child was not a) or b) then briefly state the reason they are not attending a four-year college or university:

Circle any that apply as well -- no way to pay for college education

-- lack of college preparatory coursework in high school

-- low grades

23. Is your high school senior planning to graduate at the end of the school year?
 - a) yes b) noif not, please explain why:
24. I communicate high expectations for grades and tell my child it is important to get A four-year college degree:
 - a) yes b) noIf you said yes, characterize the problems you have faced getting information from the school:
25. Please indicate how welcome parent participation at the school site is for each of the grade-level categories (choose one for each category):

K-5th grade:	a) very welcome	b) somewhat welcome	c) not welcome
Middle School:	a) very welcome	b) somewhat welcome	c) not welcome
High School:	a) very welcome	b) somewhat welcome	c) not welcome

If you marked not welcome on any of the levels, explain the problem with your experiences in parent participation:
26. I have enough information and support from administration, teachers and counselors to guide my child to take requirements for going to college at a four- year college or university:
 - a) yes b) noIf not, then what assistance would you like to see the middle schools and high schools provide in the future: