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Increasing High School Graduation Rates among
Hispanic/Latino Students in the United States

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Abstract

While the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States is rapidly increasing, the number of students from this ethnic group who graduate from high school is low. Various school-, family-, community-, and student-related factors are explored as contributing to low academic achievement and graduation rates among Hispanic students. Interventions for improving graduation rates among this student population are discussed, including increasing: 1) Hispanic students' sense of school belonging, 2) community involvement in the education of Hispanic students, and 3) involvement of Hispanic parents in their children's education. Finally, an intervention that involves group counseling for Hispanic students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels is proposed.

Increasing High School Graduation Rates among Hispanic/Latino Students in the United States

The Hispanic/Latino population in the United States expanded by 58% between the years of 1990 and 2000, making these individuals the largest minority group in the country (Atilas, Bohon, & Macpherson, 2005). Despite the increasing presence of Latinos in the United States, the number of Hispanic students who graduate from high school remains exceptionally low. In 2005, the dropout rate for Hispanic students in the United States was 5.0%, compared to 2.8% for White students; in the state of Georgia, 1,966 Hispanic students failed to complete high school in 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, 2008). Because so many Hispanic students are dropping out of high school, the Illinois Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs (2004) reported that these individuals are “less prepared to participate fully as citizens at a time when such participation is crucial not only to the individual but also to the social and economic health of our state and nation” (p. 1). Even more alarming are the statistics for female Hispanic students, who have higher dropout rates than any other ethnic/gender group in the United States; they are also less likely to attend college, as only 10% of Hispanic women complete four or more years of college, compared with 13.9% of Black women and 22.3% of White women (BBC News, 2001).

Factors Leading to School Dropout

The Illinois Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs (2004) provided four main categories of factors that contribute to the high attrition rates of Hispanic students in the United States. The first set of factors is school-related, which include poor academic performance, grade retention, and tracking of Hispanic students, as well as dilapidated school facilities and large class sizes, which are typical of the schools that many Latino students attend. The second set of factors cited

is family-related, which includes an unstable or unusually stressful home life, siblings who have dropped out, single-parent households, poorly educated parents, non-English speaking households, and a lack of parental involvement in education. Student-related factors comprise the third category, which include truancy, absenteeism, tardiness, and suspension among Latino students, as well as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and gender stereotyping. The final set of factors is community-related, which includes poverty, the need for outside employment, and frequent mobility.

In order to explore the educational experiences of immigrant Hispanic students and their families, Atilas et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study in Georgia involving in-depth interviews and focus groups with public educators and Hispanic students and parents from Colquitt, DeKalb, Hall, Liberty, Muscogee, and Whittfield counties. In terms of community- and family-related factors, the researchers discovered that the most frequent concern among key informants was that immigrant Latino families rarely fully understand the Georgia school system or the culture of education in the United States. Many Hispanic parents do not understand that they must be present to enroll their student(s) in school. Additionally, many are reluctant to enroll their students because of the financial burden of buying school clothes and school supplies; the poorest, least educated parents often mistakenly believe that they must pay for textbooks and tuition in order for their children to attend school.

Student truancy is also linked to family-related factors because many parents are unable to understand the notifications that are sent home with students (Atilas et al., 2005). The responsibility of attending parent-teacher conferences usually falls on the mother because she is typically considered the primary liaison between home and the school, as fathers are assigned the traditional role of breadwinner and are frequently uninvolved in their children's academic lives.

Although many Hispanic mothers express interest in attending these conferences, they are often unable to do so because of a lack of transportation and child care issues. When Hispanic parents fail to respond to teachers' attempts at communication, educators tend to believe that these individuals are uninterested in their children's education. A final family-related factor that contributes to Hispanic students' high truancy and low graduation rates is high mobility among migrant families. Parents who do not intend to settle permanently in the United States are less likely to see the necessity of schooling, especially if the purpose of schooling is to prepare for college in the United States; therefore, these parents encourage their children to drop out of school and get a job, which allows the family to meet their economic goals and to return to their homeland more quickly.

Atilas et al. (2005) also uncovered a variety of school-related factors that contribute to high attrition rates among Hispanic students. Some districts in the state of Georgia only offer ESOL classes to children of migrant workers and deny these services to Latino immigrants who are not children of migrant workers; this means that these students are not provided access to the basic courses needed for success in the American school system. Those students who are provided ESOL services are often moved to mainstream classes too quickly and become overwhelmed and discouraged by their inability to understand the course material, leading to students' expectations of failure. There were also reports in this study that Hispanic students who do complete all the basic requirements for graduation are often unable to pass the writing section of the English-written exit exams, and after several failed attempts, they give up on the prospect of receiving a high school diploma.

The study by Atilas et al. (2005) also revealed a student-related factor that contributes to low graduation rates among Hispanic students, particularly females. Immigrant Latina girls often

internalize traditional gender roles and do not perceive a real need for formal education. These students often believe that their primary role is to attend to family- and household-related duties, and one-third of 9- to 15- year-old Hispanic females cited pregnancy and marriage as the primary reasons for dropping out of high school (McCray & Vives, 2001). This attitude is reflected statistically, as teen pregnancy and marriage account for as much as one-third of the national dropout rate among Latina students (Illinois Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, 2004).

Proposed Interventions

While the issues facing Hispanic/Latino students in the United States are numerous, a review of literature suggests that a variety of interventions have been proposed to increase academic achievement and graduation rates among this student population, and several of these proposed solutions have empirical support for their effectiveness in doing so. Three main strategies for increasing academic performance and graduation rates among Hispanic students will be discussed: a) increasing Hispanic students' sense of school belonging, b) increasing community involvement in the education of Hispanic students, and c) increasing involvement among Hispanic parents in their children's education.

School belonging refers to how students perceive the social context of schooling and how they view themselves in relation to the structure of the school (Hammen, Olivarez, & Stevens, 2007). Gonzales and Padilla (as cited in Bejinez & Gibson, 2002) found that a sense of belonging at school was the only significant predictor of academic resilience in a sample of 2,169 Mexican American students. The Migrant Education Program (MEP), established by the federal government in 1966, was developed to provide academic and social support to students of migrant workers in the United States; this program has been found to increase students' sense of school belonging by connecting students to the education system in a way that the mainstream

school system has been able to do, resulting in lower drop-out rates among students who participate in the program (Bejinez & Gibson, 2002).

Bejinez and Gibson (2002) conducted a study at Hillside High School in Upland, California, to explore how the school was utilizing the services provided by the MEP, as well as the effects of this program on Hispanic students' sense of school belonging; at the time of the study, the migrant population at Hillside High School was predominately Mexican. Whenever possible, the MEP tried to hire staff members who are racially and ethnically similar to the students who they served because they could relate to the challenges the students faced and served as positive role models for them. At Hillside High School, the MEP staff provided various support services that included, but were not limited to, formal tutoring, academic advising, providing information about the college application process, visits to college campuses, and paid work experiences. One teacher described the MEP office at Hillside High School as a "social and cultural 'safe space' for Mexican students, a special location on campus where they can enjoy a warm and comfortable environment and a sense of community" (Bejinez & Gibson, p.167). The MEP functioned with the Migrant Student Association at Hillside High School to "provide the space and organization to contribute to students' sense of belonging and academic success in school, strengthen ties between home and school for their parents, and involve students and their families in community and school related activities" (Bejinez & Gibson, p. 171).

At Hillside High School, the MEP has resulted in lower drop-out rates among migrant students; in November 2001, 75% of the migrant students in the senior class still attended Hillside High School, as opposed to 54% of the non-migrant comparison group (Bejinez & Gibson). The success of this program in increasing student graduation rates has widespread implications for developing programs that contribute to Hispanic students' overall sense of

belonging at school; it is also important that programs like these are developed to serve all Hispanic students, not only those who are children of migrant workers.

Students' sense of school belonging was also studied by Hamman et al. (2007), who examined the effects of White middle-level teachers who employed a mastery goal orientation on Hispanic students' sense of school belonging. (A mastery goal orientation refers to a focus on learning and understanding content, rather than simply achieving a normative standard.) Results of the study indicate that Hispanic students do experience a typical sense of school belonging when taught by predominately White teachers who use a mastery goal orientation, as the students' reported feelings of school belonging were normally distributed. This suggests that teachers who differ in ethnic background from their students can positively influence students' feelings of belonging at school. Another implication of this study is that teachers who use a mastery goal orientation by challenging their students and encouraging them to think critically about their work positively affect Hispanic students' feelings of school belonging. An interesting finding of this study is that students who reported a higher sense of school belonging also reported adopting more mastery-oriented goals, resulting in students' increased sense of perseverance and risk-taking in the classroom; this results in greater academic achievement among Hispanic students and may result in higher graduation rates among these students.

Another important factor in increasing academic achievement and graduation rates among Hispanic students is increasing community involvement in the education of this student population. An example of a community-based program that was developed to meet the academic needs of Hispanic students is De Colores Community Learning Center at Las Casitas Elementary School in Dos Soles, California (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004). The program was developed by a team of educational leaders in the community, who elicited support from Art,

Research, and Associates (ARC), a local non-profit organization. They developed a common vision based on designing a professionally-run, after school, and summer program to serve under-performing Hispanic fourth- and fifth-graders through intensive small-group tutoring, cultural enrichment activities, computer training, parent workshops on student advocacy, family literacy, and participation.

The development of De Colores Community Learning Center was based on a unique approach: a model of empowerment. This model asserts that “the school community is at the center of educational protagonism, articulating its own needs and capabilities through the active participation of all stakeholders,” which would be “carried out by regularly scheduled community meetings structured around a sense of common mission (raising school achievement), the articulation of joint strategies, and an emphasis on common interests and accountability (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004, p. 60). This is in contrast to the service model, which posits the school as a passive, gracious entity that will accept contributions from community members according to their own agendas and priorities.

By using a model of empowerment, the educational leaders and members of ARC were able to recruit local university and college students as tutors for students and designed an inclusive community advisory board, comprised of parents, teachers, community leaders, and ARC personnel to oversee policies, procedures, and the daily functioning of De Colores Community Learning Center (Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004). The program was fully implemented in Fall 2001, and by the end of the 2001-2002 academic school year, 29 of 30 students had increased at least one grade in reading or math, and only 1 of 30 students was referred for special education. These early strides in student achievement are critical in preventing dropout rates, as “early educational enrichment can modify IQ and improve a child’s self-image and attitude

toward education” (Illinois Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, 2004). The development and implementation of Dos Colores Community Center provides a model for designing community-based programs focused on increasing academic achievement and reducing dropout rates among Hispanic students.

Another strategy for increasing Hispanic students’ academic achievement and graduation rates is by developing innovative techniques for increasing involvement of Hispanic parents in the academic lives of their children. Parental support is defined as “the degree to which parents are involved in and promote their children’s education,” and “it helps direct children toward positive behavior in school by reinforcing the notion of education as valuable” (Bowen & Brewster, 2004, p. 50) The Postsecondary Access to Latino Middle-Grades Students (PALMS) Project conducted a parent outreach study, in which they identified five strategies that are effective in increasing Hispanic parents’ participation in their students’ academic experiences: conducting home visits, offering parent-child activities, promoting skill development, encouraging parent ownership, and employing home-school liaisons (Clark & Dorris, 2007). Home-school liaisons, who are often hired by public school systems, need to be “bilingual and well acquainted with the local education system and... can function in a bridging role to facilitate the development of trusting relationships between parents and school personnel” (Clark & Dorris, p. 47).

In the case of the GEAR UP program, sponsored by the University of North Texas, the home-school liaisons worked to help Hispanic parents of middle and high school students overcome feelings of intimidation about becoming involved in their children’s schools; as parents began to feel more comfortable, the liaisons invited parents to attend workshops that provided education about various aspects of the U.S. school system (Clark & Dorris, 2007).

Another example of an initiative that was designed to increase parental involvement of Hispanic parents was when the leaders of Missouri State University's Hispanic Initiative developed a parent-child event, in which they coordinated a combined picnic and soccer festival for Hispanic families; the purpose of the event was to raise awareness about college opportunities. The leaders of the event called upon clergy, community groups, cultural centers, and local Mexican restaurants to sponsor the event, and local educators were responsible for dispensing information about various college opportunities, as well as the college application process.

Antrop-Gonzalez, Garrett, & Velez (2005) examined various factors related to academically successful Puerto Rican high school students, and they discovered that the students' mothers and the support they offered were particularly important influences on their children's academic success; this support included monitoring their children's success in school by checking their school work, offering help on homework, and showing interest in the subjects their children were studying. Of particular interest was the influence of Puerto Rican mothers on their daughters' academic success. The results of the study found three key factors that contributed to the success of Latinas at school: a) all the girls who were interviewed reported that their mothers encouraged them to achieve academically so that they could better themselves economically; b) they all saw their schools as a "second 'home base' because they had female teachers who embraced their ethnic and linguistic realities;" and c) their mothers encouraged them to obtain a college education so that they could serve as role models for their families and communities (Antrop-Gonzalez et al., p. 79) In order to produce optimal outcomes for Latina students, it is important to consider each these factors when designing programs intended to increase the involvement of Hispanic parents in their children's schooling.

Discussion

Strategies for increasing academic performance and graduation rates among Hispanic students include increasing their sense of school belonging, increasing community involvement in the education of Hispanic students, and increasing involvement among Hispanic parents in their children's academic lives. As a future school counselor, I propose another type of intervention that focuses on students' personal/social and academic development. This intervention would involve group counseling for Hispanic students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The purpose of group counseling would be to encourage students to develop and maintain a strong sense of ethnic identity, to enhance students' sense of self-esteem, to help students develop academic and career goals, and to provide an opportunity for these students to share in their common experiences as Hispanic/Latino individuals.

It is important to help students develop a clear understanding of their cultural identities, both as Hispanics and as Americans. Bhimji, Reese, and Zarate (2005) studied the impact of Hispanic students' ethnic identities on their academic success and found that a bicultural identity was most frequently associated with higher measurements of academic achievement. It is also imperative to encourage the development of self-esteem in Hispanic students, specifically in females, because "programs that promote self-esteem and expose students to nontraditional alternatives and Latina role models can be important in helping girls stay in school" (Illinois Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, 2004). In addition to providing Hispanic students with mastery academic experiences, group counseling would provide an ideal setting for developing students' sense of ethnic identity and self-esteem.

Finally, I believe that it would be important to help students think about their future career possibilities, even at the elementary school level, and to help students develop academic

goals in accordance with their career objectives. Students should be encouraged to design plans for obtaining these goals and to consider any institutional, cultural, or other challenges they may face in working toward their goals. I believe a counseling group focused on these objectives would positively impact students' academic achievement and would contribute to reducing high school drop out rates among Hispanic students.

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