

Integrating Cultural Perspectives of First Generation Latino Students and Families into the  
College Admissions Process

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### Acknowledgements

I have been blessed since my first day of learning how to color within the lines of having a support system around me that valued the importance of education and the investment that comes with it. Both my parents sacrificed their education to give me the best upbringing possible through their long hours of work and sacrifices. My brother continues to push me to be my best. Although I have achieved much throughout my educational career, he always seems to find a way to leave a bigger footprint than the one I had led him with, and is often not afraid to carve his own path all together. For that, the little brother is truly the biggest role model. To my dear friends who showed me that education is not limited to the classroom- that regardless of ethnicity, religion, political ideology, and sexual orientation, every person has the fundamental right to be themselves and to not be hindered in that pursuit. To the half of the country that does not believe that- thank you for teaching me how to work with difficult people. Thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Madalienne Peters, for showing what the essence of a Dominican Education is all about: support, encouragement, and understanding.

Every morning, there are thousands of high school students across our country that walk through classroom doors and, despite a lack of resources, support, counseling, and finances, dream of one day graduating from college. An ever-increasing amount of these students are minorities, children of families who came to this country to do exactly what my parents have done for me- endure sacrifices to give their children a future filled with hope through the tool of education. Immigrant or native, undocumented or citizen, let us not simplify the struggles of thousands of children across the country because others look or speak differently from ourselves.

Abstract

First generation college-bound Latino students and their families are placed at a disadvantage in the college admissions process for a variety of reasons. Their cultural perspectives in relation to education and family combined with the increasingly widening gap between the working class and professional middle class has left many Latino families stuck in low socio-economic situations, making college affordability a less plausible goal. Thus, analyzing correlations between population, ethnicity, and college enrollment, integrating cultural perspectives into the college search process, cultivating support systems for these students, and breaking down socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options are main focuses of my research.

The purpose of this study is to develop strategies for integrating cultural perspectives of first generation college-bound Latino students and their families into the college admissions process, to examine the attitudes that exist about the college admissions process within that specific demographic, to analyze the role race and class play in the ability to achieve educational attainment, and to use these findings to cater more effectively to first-generation Latino families.

Questions that will be researched include what are the most effective strategies for integrating cultural perspectives of first generation college-bound students and their families into the college admissions process to more effectively communicate and educate them on the expectations of the process? What systems of support have first-generation Latino students and their families who have already gone through the process found most helpful?

This study followed a qualitative approach, action research design to give voice to the cultural perspectives of first generation college-bound Latino students and their families into the college admissions process.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

As a former high school teacher, I realized that the Latino students and their families were not as fluent in the process of beginning to apply for college admission, nor did they seem to express the same interest in college as the other students. Most of the other families had an ingrained understanding of the importance of college. I began to question why. Through talking to Latino students and meeting their families, I came to find out the various factors that contribute to this attitude. As Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at a small liberal arts university, this disconnect is even more apparent. The lack of education surrounding the idea of an investment when it comes to a college degree, the void of support systems for first generation Latino students, and socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options are just a few. It is important to realize that an ever-increasing amount of high school students across our country that walk through classroom doors are minorities. These students, although often expected to hold the same beliefs, values, and knowledge about the importance of a college education and the same ability to reach it than their white counterparts, have drastically different views on the educational process. Instead of shrugging our shoulders and sweeping this disconnect under the rug, we must face it head on, as educating our youth must be a top priority.

The main question I pose in my research is what are effective strategies for integrating cultural perspectives of first generation college-bound Latino students and their families into the college admissions process? I also question what are some strategies available to more effectively communicate and educate them on the expectations of the process? What systems of support have first-generation Latino students and their families who have already gone through the process found most helpful?

### Theoretical Rationale

Paulo Freire's model of Critical Pedagogy is the foundational theory for my research. His focus on eliminating inequality and oppression through education while examining the class structure of society to achieve a more just opportunity for all is key (McInerney, 2009, p. 26). The ability of education to transform social relationships hinges upon teachers respecting and taking advantage of their students' knowledge of their personal environment and culture in the classroom, which in turn helps them come to recognize their role in the world (p. 27). This rationale relates directly to integrating cultural perspectives of first-generation Latino students and their families into the college search process. Cultivating support systems for these students directly improves their ability and motivation to recognize their role in the world, and examining class structures that still exist in American society investigates the limits of an equal education for all.

### Assumptions

Throughout our country, many assume that the access to education and the ability to achieve a college degree is a fundamental right. We have been socialized to romanticize 'The American Dream', where anyone regardless of race, class, or sex can achieve success by moving up in society, using education as a means to an end. I am also assuming that given the increase in the Latino population within the United States, many first-generation Latino families have placed a priority on becoming financially stable in order to secure their place in the country, and thus the investment in education is something that takes a back seat.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Research

“With our economy faltering, populations graying and competitiveness waning, we need to treat the cultivation of our brightest young minds as a national imperative,” (Mills, 2010, p. 6). With this in mind, I focus in this chapter on previous research geared towards examining how we can better serve first generation college-bound Latino students and their families throughout the college admissions process. Themes of how to do this- analyzing correlations between population, ethnicity, and college enrollment, integrating cultural perspectives into the college search process, cultivating support systems for these students, and breaking down socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options- are four of the keys themes discussed. In addition, literature taken from my interview with an expert in the subject area provides a concrete foundation on which the above themes can be applied to.

## Population, Ethnicity, and College Enrollment Correlations

In one aspect, the ability to achieve a college education has increased dramatically throughout the past century. This open access resulting from notable reforms, such as the introduction of the G.I. Bill and the Civil Rights movement, has increased the number of people over the age of 25 with a college degree to 1 in 4, up from the 1950’s, when only 6 percent of adults had achieved college degrees (Alon, Domina, & Tienda, 2010, p.1807). Some of the most influential research in the field has been conducted by Zarate and Burciaga (2010), who provide a foundation of where to begin, noting that there, “...Is a persistent and widening gap in college enrollment and attainment between Latinos and whites,” (p. 25). Further, “Latinos are the largest non-white ethnic group in the United States, estimated to comprise 15.4 percent of the population, and are growing at a much faster rate than the rest of the nation,” (p. 25).

According to newly released results from the 2010 United States Census, that number has increased to about 16.6%, including 1 in every 5 children in public schools nationwide (Devore, 2011). The newly released results also predict that the, “Date for when America will become “majority minority” -- where no one ethnic group makes up more than half the population -- is expected to be as early as 2042,” much earlier than previously anticipated (Devore, 2011). In California specifically, Latinos comprise 36.6 percent of the population (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010, p. 25). They go on to cite that “Latinos’ youthful presence is visible in our nation’s public schools with Latinos projected to comprise 25 percent of all students enrolled in US public schools in 2025” (p. 25). Just under 3.25 million high school seniors across our nation are set to graduate this summer, with projections indicating that number will continue to grow, reaching just under 3.5 million by 2022.

According to Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010), “The growing Hispanic-white college gap challenges classic sociological predictions that between-group inequalities will tend to decline as society-wide educational opportunities increase. According to status attainment theory, educational expansion permits upward intergenerational mobility, particularly for groups with low average levels of educational attainment,” (p. 1808).

Considering these statistics, the lack of support and college enrollment for the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States is a matter of national importance that deserves our full attention. The statistics provide a shocking sample of how Latinos are severely underrepresented in college enrollment. According to Denner, Cooper, Dunbar, and Lopez (2005), 36% of Latino students enrolled in college after graduating high school in 1997, compared to 46% of white students and 39% of African American students. In 2003, Hispanic



students made up 7.2% of the collective undergraduate population at America's top 146 college and universities. While that number jumped to 8.3% by 2007, it was severely disproportional to the Hispanic population of America at the time (Mills, 2010, p. 6).

Narrowing the focus on California sheds even more light on these disparities. California law outlines that 12.5% of high school graduates across the state be eligible for the University of California (UC) system (Cooper, Cooper, Robert, Azmitia, Chavira, and Gullatt, 2002, p. 74). In 1996, 3.5% of Latino high school graduates across the state were eligible for the UC system (p. 74). When faced with these obvious disparities, we are forced to examine why.

#### Cultivating Support Systems for Latino Students

A main area of focus is examining the support structures in place to help Latino students through the transition from high school to college. As Perna and Titus (2005) state, "Researchers have found that parental involvement is associated with a greater likelihood of aspiring to attend college and actually enrolling," (p. 486). In addition, Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010) show that, "In 1994, 59 percent of high school graduates whose parents lacked college degrees enrolled in a post-secondary institution compared with 93 percent of students with college-educated parents. These disparities are even more striking according to type of institution attended. Only 27 percent of high school graduates whose parents were not college educated attended a four-year institution, but more than 70 percent of their schoolmates with college-educated parents did so," (p.1808-1809).

The reasoning behind their findings include, "College-educated parents are better equipped to convey their postsecondary expectations at young ages. They better understand the post-secondary landscape and increasingly competitive admissions process, and invest more in resources to promote college-going," (p.1808). Within Hispanic families, the need for students to

balance school and work to help support the family can also add an additional level of stress to the process. In the end, this burden can often be overwhelming and school is put on hold. In essence, we acknowledge that parental involvement plays a role in aspiring students to attend college, but the perspectives, parental education attainment, and ability for that support to take place are drastically different amongst different ethnic groups. Parents are not the only authority to play a role in the support of these students.

High school counselors play a vital role in the college transition process for underrepresented students, and can often have very positive or detrimental effects on the aspirations of underrepresented students. It has been found that, “Inadequate advisement, lack of availability, lack of individual counseling, differential treatment, and low expectations” are some of the criticisms Latino high school students have had about their counselors (Vela-Gude, Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 272). The students in the previous study voiced frustration over the assumptions their counselors made about them, “...She would always leave a message saying ‘Come back after school.’ But I couldn’t go after school because I would have to work after school... she just thought I wasn’t willing to stay after school because I was lazy. I overheard this conversation. I overheard her say this and I felt horrible” (Vela-Gude, Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 277).

Providing support and outreach for Latino youth in various forms is essential in helping them realize the importance of higher education. One of the major roadblocks for Latino students and their families of understanding the investment in education is that they, “May have conceptions of how to progress in society that run contrary to the belief that academic performance translates directly into future successes and may exhibit distrust of mainstream

educational institutions,” (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007, p. 262). In addition, many Latino students have difficulty finding relevance in the curriculum, noting that they, “May experience challenges to academic engagement resulting from the lack of perceived relevance of academic content to their personal experiences,” (p. 262).

### Integrating Cultural Perspectives of Latino Students and Families

As stated earlier, parental involvement plays a pivotal role in increasing college enrollment. With this in mind, it is important to consider that “most approaches to parental involvement rely on a cultural deficit approach that emphasizes traditional forms of parental involvement without considering the ways in which the nature of parental involvement may vary across groups,” thus completely ignoring the cultural perspectives of parental involvement within Latino families (Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 491). Andersen & Collins (2010) argue that this is a result of a hierarchy of cultures within our nation, where “...Professional middle class social style, language, and knowledge constitute a kind of social currency,” (p. 127). All too often, we fail to recognize that “Working class people are raised with a more here-and-now sensibility, in activities and worldview; individuality (but not necessarily self) is downplayed in favor of a powerful sense of community and loyalty, and an internal sense of ‘belonging’,” (p. 126).

In addition, Andersen and Collins (2010) state, “To succeed in higher education...working class people must learn to adopt and represent middle class culture as their own. This culture does not grant dual citizenship,” (p. 127). Further, Perna and Titus (2005) cite a previous study that shows “...Before parents could participate in their child’s education in a meaningful way, their social, economic, and physical needs had to be addressed,” (p. 491). For many Latino families in low socio-economic communities, this means ensuring food is on the table and the entire family has contributed to the financial security of the family- including the children. This

emphasis on work and contribution to family income can be seen in the startling fact that in 2001, 52% of Latino high school graduates enrolled in college, while over 66% of Latino high school graduates between the ages of 16-19 were employed or seeking employment (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007, p. 261). According to Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010), these cultural differences are some of the reasons why even college educated Hispanic parents, both foreign-born and native-born, “Are handicapped in their abilities to transmit their educational advantages to their children compared with white parents,” (p. 1807).

According to Crockett, Iturbide, Torres Stone, McGinley, Raffaelli, and Carlo (2007), these cultural differences discussed above often can result in high levels of stress for Latino students, specifically experiencing, “Higher levels of academic, financial, and personal stress than those of Anglo students,” (p. 347). They argue that when, “Pressures to assimilate, lack of intercultural competence, or discrimination are perceived as exceeding one’s ability to cope, this should lead to a subjective of stress and to negative emotions,” (p. 348). In this scenario, the lack of parental experience in the college process for first-generation Latino students plays a significant role as they are unable to help their child cope with the stress or relate to their experience, typically ending with the student reverting to an environment that is more welcoming.

#### Socio-Economic Barriers, Lack of Access, and Financial Aid Awareness

As of 2007, the United States had one of the highest levels of income inequality among high income countries, having a higher level of income inequality than Pakistan, Kenya, India, China, or Yemen. In the late 1990s, Uganda actually had a better income distribution than that of the United States (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). The disparity of income between ethnic demographics within the United States can be seen when we examine that

although Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010, p. 25), “Median income for Hispanic households was \$37,781 in 2006, which was 72 percent of the median for non-Hispanic White households,” (United States Census Bureau, 2006, p. 7). In addition, Hispanics had the lowest per-capita income of full-time workers compared to other ethnic groups in 2006, (United States Census Bureau, 2006, p. 6). According to Kim, DesJardins, and McCall (2009), the discrepancy between income levels and college cost, and in turn college attendance, is an issue that especially affects lower income students. They argue, “Students from lower income families tend to be more responsive to tuition changes and the availability of financial aid, and often under-invest in college education if the price of college increases without financial aid offers to offset these increases,” (p.742).

Because a student does not have a proportional change in aid to keep up with the change in cost, their ability to attend college is decreased, and in turn so is their income mobility and chance to change their socio-economic status (Kim, DesJardins, & McCall, 2009, p.742). Their study also indicates that the amount of financial aid expected compared to the amount of aid actually awarded greatly effects enrollment probabilities for those students identified as low-income, especially if the amount of actual aid is lower than expected. They go on to argue these enrollment results, “May be due to higher aid amount expectations among these students due to higher need, less information about alternative financing methods, and/or less information about the benefits of a college education, such as increased future earnings,” (p. 763). These arguments easily coexist with the previously mentioned literature pointing out that low expectations from high school counselors, the lack of support for an investment in college, and the emphasis on the family are ingrained in the minds of many first-generation Latino students, thus hindering them from having an understand of the benefits of a college education.

## Interview with an Expert

### *Sample and Site*

My interview with an expert is with Mr. Edgar Montes, Co-Chair of the Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee of the Western Association for College Admission Counseling. According to the WACAC website, “The committee supports outreach efforts at early, intermediate and transfer levels intended to increase the number of college students from low-income and ethnically-diverse populations,” and, “Hosting Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access, a pre-conference designed to assist educational professionals at all levels, to work successfully with a more diverse population whose needs differ from those of the majority population,” (Western Association for College Admission Counseling, 2011). His experience working with minority students and familiarity with the college admissions process provides a detailed insight into how cultural perspectives of first generation Latino students and their families can be integrated into the process.

### *Ethical Standards*

This study adheres to ethical standards. To seek and ensure the protection of human subjects, it was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and approved, review number #8242. The use of human subjects in experimentation is an area that is not to be taken lightly. It is extremely important to protect participants and not violate their constitutional rights. All participant information in this research study is kept strictly confidential as individuals have the right to privacy.

## Data Gathering Strategies

### *Interview*

The following are interview questions that I have prepared, based upon my submission of the IRB application. The questions were e-mailed to Mr. Montes along with the statement of consent, which he signed and returned.

- Based on your experience in working with Latino families, what can college admissions counselors do to better educate and involve those families in the application and admissions process?

- Can you please explain national trends of an increase in the Latino high school population but not a corresponding increase in Latino college applications? Enrollment? College graduation rates?

- What has to happen over the next 5 years to better inform and educate Latino families that college is a viable option after high school graduation?

- Please share with me other information that you feel is important in understanding this research area.

Integrating cultural perspectives into the college search process, cultivating support systems for these students, and breaking down socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options are many of the same key issues echoed by Mr. Montes as the previous research. “It is disheartening to hear that Latinos are currently one out of every five students in American high schools, but that only a fraction of those students will go to college, and even fewer will actually graduate,” Montes says. He addresses the importance of understanding the struggles of many first-generation Latino students by stating the following:

Latino males do not have many college educated role models. Especially in Latino families, the value of a college education is difficult to see in tangible ways. If Latino students are going to college, many are the first in their family to go. This journey can create various roadblocks that hinder students from being successful.

Because of these various roadblocks, according to Montes, it is essential to cultivate support systems for these students and families. He argues that one way to do so is to, “Seek out individuals that have an early influence on students, especially in the transition from middle school to high school.” Once those individuals are targeted, we can begin to, “Involve those individuals to create a pipeline of students with a strong expectation that they will be going to college.” Montes also believes it is important to, “Seek out organizations (ie. Churches, restaurants, libraries, etc) where Latino students and their families already congregate,” which will allow admissions counselors to become more trusted within the community and involve the entire family in the process.

Although the recruitment side is key, retention, or the ability to keep the students you have enrolled, is a huge factor that requires attention. Montes says this is important because, “Supporting the trust in the Latino community will require that their son/daughter has a good college experience and completes their degree.” Ways to do this include the ability to, “Utilize campus resources such as advisors, professors, resident assistants, etc. to check in on the academic and social well being of your students,” and to, ‘Find key parent partners that will support your efforts in the community.

Montes believes that breaking down socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options and increasing access to this information is also another



crucial area to focus on. He argues, “With a growing Latino population, especially in non-traditional areas, access to information is sometimes limited or not given,” and that admissions counselors should, “Have at your disposal marketing pieces that are in Spanish and if possible also family-centered.”

Finally, Montes points to two unique factors that may play a role in the growing gap between Latino high school graduation, college enrollment, and college graduation. First, he states, “Much of the Latino college population can be found in community colleges across the country,” and although they play a very important role in our educational framework, “With the financially difficult times, many of these programs are being eliminated.” Thus, the access to higher education has become increasingly difficult. In addition, he says each aspect of the community can play a role, especially employers, stating the following:

Many of the students that are dropping out of high school and college without obtaining a degree are in many cases going into the workforce. These employers would be key allies to communicate information about advancing their education. They first need to support the effort.

## Summary

Through the interview with an expert, I am able to put my research in a national context, bringing to light information and knowledge that the individual has on the movement towards diversity of opportunity in the college admissions process. This gives my research credible testimony and will be a firsthand account from an individual who also works at a school where the majority of students are first generation Latino. His focus in integrating cultural perspectives into the college search process, cultivating support systems for these students, and breaking

down socio-economic barriers that hinder these families from realizing there are affordable options have been brought into a brighter light. In addition, with the recommendation for better access to financial aid education and more opportunities to help understand the process of financial aid, Montes sets the stage for a future where, “Education needs to be a vital player in the lives of Latino students and their parents,” that involves, “Both students and families to obtain their perspective and experience.”

## Chapter 3 Method

### Description of Method

For my research, I used a mixed methods approach, including a qualitative and quantitative data. Although statistical information provides a general view of trends in higher education when it comes to ethnicity, numbers only tell half the story. The crux of my research results are qualitative, stemming from an expert on the subject matter and current first-generation Latino college students who have gone through the application process. I have combined these results, along with previous literature written on the subject matter, to bring to light the challenges that face first-generation Latino students in terms of higher education.

### Sample and Site

In my role as Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at a four-year university, I have numerous forms of research at my disposal. Most of my quantitative results are from a collection of respected sources I researched in detail, such as the *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Admission*, and the U.S. Census Bureau. I used purposive sampling through the use of interviews, selecting current college students who, through my personal experience with them and their application process, have identified themselves as first-generation Latino students. Along with some of the same questions I asked my expert in the field, they shared with me their personal experiences in regards to the college search and application process. My developed relationships with most of these individuals have occurred through work, and thus I am able to have a wide variety of experts to use for my data collection.

## Ethical Standards

This study adheres to ethical standards established by the American Psychological Association. To seek and ensure the protection of human subjects, it was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and approved, review number 8242. The use of human subjects in experimentation is an area that is not to be taken lightly. It is extremely important to protect participants and not violate their constitutional rights. All participant information in this research study is kept strictly confidential as individuals have the right to privacy. Student participants understand the purpose of research, along with having informed consent. This informed consent includes:

### *The General Purpose of the Research*

To examine what are the most effective strategies for integrating cultural perspectives of first generation college-bound students and their families into the college admissions process to more effectively communicate and educate them on the expectations of the process. Also included is identifying what systems of support first-generation Latino students and their families who have already gone through the process found most helpful.

### *What Will be Done to them During the Research?*

All student participants were asked the same questions, and had an opportunity to describe their story on the college admissions process, detailing what systems of support they found most helpful.

### *Potential Benefits*

Although no direct benefit will result from a student's participation in the research, they will be contributing their experiences and thoughts to a topic that is meaningful to them. The

outcome of the research, with the help of their stories, may help future first-generation Latino students better understand the college admissions process.

#### *Potential for Harm*

Potential harms include bringing up struggles that they may have experienced throughout the application process that may have had a negative and lasting impact on them.

#### *Option to Withdraw*

Their ability to withdraw from the research at any time before, during, or after the study was acknowledged and recognized by consent in writing before any research had taken place. These consent forms will be kept confidential. These ethical standard techniques supply the physical and psychological protection of all human subjects participating in this research study.

#### Access and Permissions

Access to contact information for student participants was formed throughout my interaction with them as a student at the university which I work at, with knowledge and permission given to me by my direct supervisor to use that work access. Permissions have been approved by all student participants by signing the Consent to be a Research Subject section in the approved IRB form.

#### Data Gathering Strategies

#### *Interview*

The following are interview questions based upon my submission of the IRB application. The questions were e-mailed to each student selected to participate in my research study.

1. What can college admissions counselors do to better educate and involve those families in the application and admissions process?
2. Can you please explain national trends of an increase in the Latino high school population but not a corresponding increase in Latino college applications? Enrollment? College graduation rates?
3. What has to happen over the next 5 years to better inform and educate Latino families that college is a viable option after high school graduation?
4. Please share with me other information that you feel is important in understanding this research area.

#### Analysis Approach

Student responses to the interview research questions were e-mailed back to me. Once all were collected, a detailed analysis of the responses led to the emergence of four key themes. These themes are discussed in Chapter 4, and a comparison of these themes from the interviews with previous research is discussed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### Description of Site, Individuals, Data

A total of four self-identified first-generation Latino undergraduate students were selected by me to be research participants. These students attend a private, four-year liberal arts university in California that has a total enrollment of 2,267. Eighty-nine percent of undergraduate students receive some sort of financial aid at this institution, where tuition is set at \$36,900 for the 2011-2012 academic year. As for demographics, 92% of students are from California, with 46% of students coming from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Of the entire student population, 25 percent are first in their family to attend college.

The students who have contributed to the study are made up of 2 males and 2 females, all from California. In respect to grade level, there are 2 first year students, a sophomore student-athlete, and a senior graduating this May. This selection was intentional as to not discriminate based on the number of years since high school graduation and to also provide a diverse range of experiences within the university setting. The data gathered was qualitative and the questions asked were intended to illicit responses from them about their own experience of the college admissions process.

### Summary of Themes/Findings

As a result of the analysis of these interviews, four main themes emerged. Students noted that a cultivation of support is crucial for first-generation Latino students to pursue a college degree, both at the high school and college level. In addition, outreach from professionals throughout the college admission process is key. They noted that the investment of a college

education is tough to grasp for many Latinos because of the cultural integrity of work and importance of family limits the pursuit of higher education for many. Finally, better access to financial aid education and more opportunities to help understand the process of financial aid is seen as an area that has much room for improvement. The following is a detailed collection of their responses to the research questions presented above.

### *Cultivating Support*

Angelica, a sophomore, points out the difficulty her and her family had in finding support when she went through the college admission process. “The process is difficult especially for parents who have never been through the application process. Many times there is no motivation to continue on because no one has been in that situation before.” She goes on to say that motivation is crucial and that one of the best tools, “Is hope for a better future knowing that someone believes they can make it,” and that “When parents don’t believe in you, they need to rely on another adult to let them know that they will make it in life.” Angel, a freshman, gives his reason for the gap between Latino high school graduation rates and Latino college enrollment rates because of the lack of support and motivation, saying the following:

As a Latino I believe the reason is because of the lack of motivation. Unfortunately in high school, instructors do not stress the importance of college. When students more specifically Latino, are not given the chance to excel by those they are surrounded by how do colleges expect them to attend college.

Rosa, a senior, acknowledges that although support in high school for first-generation Latino students is crucial, having that support and becoming comfortable with your environment once you have made the next step in college is just as important. She says the following:



Although freshman orientation helps a great deal, it is still very difficult for a first-generation student to assimilate into college culture. It is important to let students know that they are not alone in this process. It is important to let students know that they should not feel embarrassed for being the first in their family to go to college. Most importantly, it is important to help them realize and understand that if they do feel guilty, confused, or embarrassed (alienation), its okay to feel this way and someone is available to help them sort out these new feelings and emotions.

Rosa goes on to describe why asking for help and guidance should be approached with the cultural perspective in mind, saying, “In Latino culture, there is a stigma associated with having to ask someone with “power” for help. Sometimes, it is embarrassing to admit that we have no idea what we are doing.”

### *Importance of Outreach*

Angelica argues, “There must be an increase in outreach programs towards Latino families in order to education them and inform them on the importance of going to college.” Many of these families can be overwhelmed of where to even begin in the process with so many steps to take. Thus, the importance of workshops and active participation in these steps with educational professionals is key. Angelica says:

An event that can help with the application process step by step can help, especially with the financial aid part, filing for your FAFSA for the first time is difficult. I feel as if there were more workshops towards this then the application and admissions process would be made much easier for the families.

Angel also notes the importance of these interactive workshops, saying, “From my personal experience an interactive activity such as this benefits both the parents as well the students, by giving them a better idea.” Rosa adds to the importance of providing a service that benefits the family as a whole, saying, “It may be a good investment to provide printed materials in Spanish for families that may need help with translations.” She also raises a good point that many professionals often gloss over, arguing, “In this case, a student should not also have to serve as a translator because it may also be the first time that they are being exposed to new vocabulary, language, and concepts.” Rosa goes on to speak of the important role high school counselors play and their need to be culturally aware of working with certain populations, saying:

It is important for counselors to have an understanding on how to be culturally sensitive with certain populations. Over the next five years, counselors need to figure out how they can make themselves available to students interested in college sooner rather than later. Student/Parent panels can be introduced as early as freshman year so that the importance of a college education may be reiterated throughout the following four years.

Oscar, a freshman, echoes Rosa’s view on the importance of counselors, stating, “My mom did not know too much about college because she never went so I had to ask other family members and my guidance counselor in high school for help.” He also speaks about the importance of cultural clubs in high school that provides outreach for first-generation Latinos, stating the following:

There was opportunity at my high school for Latinos to learn more information on secondary schooling. There was a few clubs, MESA and MECHA were the two that influence Latinos to continue on. In my town, if you did not go to college then most

likely you would stay in it and get into trouble for the years to come. It may sound stereotypical, but Latinos were the ones to get into gangs in my town. Most Latinos did not think that they had the opportunity or MONEY to go to school, and that's why some don't even try to succeed in high school. Personally, I think that is a horrible thing to believe.

### *Integrating Cultural Perspectives*

Angelica addresses how an investment of a college education is tough to grasp for many Latinos because of the cultural integrity of work and importance of family by saying the following:

Many believe that all you need is a high school diploma to get an okay job, but don't realize the importance of a college education. After graduating from high school, many simply just want to get a job, get money, and move on with their lives. But now a days what type of job can you get with only a high school diploma? Not many.

Angel states, "We as Latino's come from the working class and most of the time many parents believe it to be most important to work and support the family." Both of these perspectives are shared by Rosa, who argues the following:

Students may also feel guilty, confused, and embarrassed for being the first in their family to go to college. One may feel guilty for leaving home during a time of financial need. For example, if a student comes from a single-parent home, they may feel guilty for not getting a job after high school in order to contribute to the family income. In some cases, it is cultural to take on the responsibility. Some families don't understand why a student would want to "abandon" their home. Confusion comes from not knowing what to do.

College admissions counselors often represent the university through recruitment and are often the first line of communication to students and their families. Rosa says that these interactions are crucial to gaining support and trust from a Latino family by being inclusive throughout the process, saying, “It is important for college admissions counselors to consider the students’ family members in the application and admissions process because interdependence is valued within Latin communities and households.”

### *The Importance of Financial Aid*

For many families, the actual admissions letter to a specific college or university doesn’t have as much impact on a student’s choice of where to attend as does the amount of financial aid they receive. As was stated earlier in the research of previous literature, although Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010, p. 25), Hispanics have the lowest median personal income amongst any ethnic group in the United States for people 25 years old or over (United States Census Bureau, 2006). In addition, Hispanics have the lowest median personal income amongst any ethnic group, with both genders included, in the United States for those who have attained a Bachelors Degree (United States Census Bureau, 2006). Considering that parents of first-generation Latino students often do not have a bachelors degree, that amount is even lower. Given these circumstances, the process of financial aid becomes extremely important.

Oscar notes the importance of financial aid, saying, “I knew that it was going to be a tough decision on where I wanted to go to college, I chose the one that I loved and received a substantial amount of financial aid.” He notes that he is lucky, adding, “Some students apply but don’t believe they have the money to pay for it even if they get accepted. I think it all comes down to money and motive for most Latino students.” He also notes an interesting point,

acknowledging that, “It’s the students that don’t have that much money that can get the most money through scholarship, i.e. FAFSA. My high school really implemented that but some don’t even care.”

Angelica addresses the lack of education many first-generation Latino families receive about the investment of a college education and the struggle to understand the best financial steps, saying, “Enrolling in a college for a higher education may involve taking out loans, which in a later future many won’t be able to pay back.” She argues that even once a student is in college, the financial burden of having to take out loans without any materialistic return can be frustrating to these families and that, “Many will get tired of going to school or will realize that school isn’t for them and will look towards the money side of life and will look for a job.”

When asked what he thinks the reasons are as to why there is not an proportional increase between college enrollment and population amongst first-generation Latino students, Oscar notes the following:

I do not mean to say all Latino students are of low income but the reality is there is a handful that are. This notion is what holds back students from applying, because the potential and want is there, although the ability to afford it is not.

Although all of these students offer areas for improvement, they all have a positive outlook for the future of first-generation Latino students if the above recommendations of cultivating support, increasing the level of outreach, integrating cultural perspectives, and better education to students and families about financial aid can be put into place. For example, Oscar states that he hopes he can, “Be an example to the others that it is possible to succeed after high school.” Rosa notes that honesty and a realistic approach from the outset can provide a great

foundation for a successful future, giving the example that, “An admissions counselor should be able to sit down with the families and work together on an attainable four-year plan.”

## Chapter 5 Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings

The four students interviewed as part of the research shared a personal account of some of the struggles they faced throughout the college admissions process and the steps we can take to diminish those struggles for others. Each of the four students seemed to place a great emphasis on support and motivation as a determining factor of college attendance. It seems as if many of them realize that although parents may be supportive, the educational experience those parents often lack needs to be provided by another authority figure. Just as when Angelica stated, “When parents don’t believe in you, they need to rely on another adult to let them know that they will make it in life,” we realize that those adults can come in the form of high school counselors, outreach programs, and admissions representatives. This sense of belonging allows first-generation Latino students to realize that it is possible to attend college, and through the support of programs like Oscar found through MESA and MECHA, the foundation is made for an investment in education.

There was also a feeling amongst the four responses that rising tuition costs and limited financial aid, coupled with a lack of access and education on the subject, affects the Latino community most prevalent, almost resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. There was a sense that because of their economic status, their counselors would not provide them with enough information about the college process because they didn’t expect them to succeed, thus limiting their ability to ever succeed in the first place. In addition, these students voiced concern over how to portray the investment of an education to their family, often noting that in Latino culture once may face criticism for pursuing that instead of work.

### Comparison of Findings with Existing Studies

Although much of the previous research, including my interview with Mr. Montes, was echoed in the interviews conducted with student participants, there were subtle differences that came from the perspective of the students. Earlier, Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010), stated that, “College-educated parents are better equipped to convey their postsecondary expectations at young ages. They better understand the post-secondary landscape and increasingly competitive admissions process, and invest more in resources to promote college-going,” (p.1808). Although the four students interviewed did not dispute this, they seemed more accepting that they needed support and motivation more from their family than actual educational expertise. Much of this expertise can rest on the support a student receives from their high school counselor. Essentially, the students look at these two forms of authority figures for two different reasons. Perhaps their call for motivational factors throughout the college application process can be linked to Constantine, Kindaichi, and Miville’s argument that, “Gender- and race-matched role models may provide adolescents of color with the belief that they have a place of value in college settings or in professional work positions, despite racist and sexist stereotypes that may communicate otherwise,” (2007, p. 264).

As far as integrating cultural perspectives and the importance of financial aid, previous research, my interview with Mr. Montes, and results from student interviews all seem to be on the same page. The importance to provide families with educational materials early and often, offering those materials in a language they understand, the willingness to keep the entire family in mind, and the knowledge to understand the psychological implications of such a decision in the Latino culture are all crucial to the college admissions and financial aid process.



### Limitations of the Study

While I focus my research on Latino students and their families, not every statistic within the research uses the same terminology. Many sources use the term *Hispanic* in place of *Latino*, while some even use them both to represent two different demographics. Thus, some of the statistics may not be completely accurate given different demographic labels. Within the group of four students that were interviewed, they obviously represent four success stories that do not occur the majority of the time. It is important to understand that each of them, although speaking honestly about the frustrations they experienced throughout the college admissions process, came from supportive high schools and had supportive college counselors throughout the admissions process. In addition, these students did well academically in high school, which with a combination of high need and results from the FAFSA, allows them to qualify for many government and state grants, such as the state-funded Cal Grant. Students who have a lower achievement level in high school, yet have the same need, may not be able to qualify for the same level of financial support.

### Implications for Future Research

Although this study reveals the need for greater support systems and outreach programs for first-generation Latino students and their families, the details of how those programs would look were not explored. It would be interesting to analyze what types of support programs have been implemented in various high schools and then to examine the college enrollment rates from students that have graduated from those high schools. Taking it a step further, comparing high school graduation rates in specific counties within California with the percentage of the Latino population in those counties would provide a good framework of how much of an impact class really does have on education.

### Overall Significance of the Study

This study provides evidence that we have a ways to go in establishing a system where every child has an equal shot at a quality education. Perhaps in some ways, this study can break down the many stereotypes that surround Latino students and their families- that they are lazy, lack any urge to go to college, and are content with just getting by. When we read personal testimony of students' frustrations with a lack of support and encouragement combined with cultural expectations that put a priority on providing for the family over education and the psychological pain of betrayal and isolation when they do not, it provides us with a wake up call that we are contributing to the very same disparity in opportunity that we all talk about wanting to eradicate. This research can be useful for high school counselors, teachers, financial aid employees, and college admissions counselors in order to better understand how barriers to a college education differ between demographics and how to tailor their efforts to specifically address those. With that support and inclusive outreach, we can take the next step in ensuring that every child has the opportunity to achieve a quality education.

### Conclusion

With every morning that passes, with every lunch that is packed, and with every pencil that is sharpened, the future of our country is being paved within the walls of our schools. We hear stories of budget cuts and performance shortfalls, and most of us throw up our arms in disgust. We say we have had it and that something needs to be done, but after the dust is cleared, many of us turn our attention to more 'immediate concerns'. We have a notion in this country that the problems within our educational institutions only affect those who are directly involved with it. Reaching the point where we realize that our very lives are intersected by the educational

opportunities available to our children is crucial. We need to address the reasons why children of different color, different place of residence, and different country of origin have a different opportunity to succeed and achieve in higher education. We need to eliminate our countries' notion that, "So long as we are equal at the starting line, we expect and accept the inequalities of income and wealth that result from individual differences in talent and industry," (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003, p. 45).

It is my hope that by integrating cultural perspectives of minority students, in this case first-generation Latinos, cultivating support systems for these students and their families, and breaking down socio-economic barriers that hinder them from realizing there are affordable options, we can start to find a way to change the opportunity gap. We are limited in our ability to be inclusive because we only have the experiences of our own perspectives, yet we should not be influenced by that. Seeing the world through a different lens- a lens that shows a much different picture than the one you are taught- can be an experience that shakes you to your core. Instead of disregarding others' experiences just because we have not been through it, we should use it to mold a different one. Let us be the adults we think we are by leading by example for our children to follow in the footsteps of.

In conclusion, let us keep in mind the words Robert Kennedy echoed in Cape Town, South Africa in June 1966, and apply it to the future of our educational system and the future hopes and dreams we place in the hands of our children. "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance" (Kennedy, 1966).

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