

**Helping Latina/o Students Navigate the College Choice Process:**

**Considerations for Secondary School Counselors**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study utilized interviews with 20 Latina/o high school seniors and five secondary school counselors in South Texas to further understand how counselors help Latina/o students navigate their college choice process. Findings indicate counselors provided students with access to college information and facilitated university representative visits and other college opportunities. However, assistance with individual academic and college planning was limited due to counselors' multiple duties and large caseloads. Counselors also noted challenges for Latina/o students related to: gender role expectations, *familismo*, financial need, and first generation college status. Considerations for secondary school counselors working with Latina/o students are provided.

## **Helping Latina/o Students Navigate the College Choice Process: Considerations for Secondary School Counselors**

Secondary school counselors can play a pivotal role in helping students access a postsecondary education (Fallon, 1997; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Johnson & Steward, 1991; McDonough, 2004, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). This is particularly true for students whose social networks are limited in college knowledge, students who are the first in their family to attend college (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004) and students from low-income households (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Joyce, 1987; Kurlaeander, 2006). Many Latina/o students face such circumstances (Choy, 2001; Sáenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007) and consequently experience difficulties in navigating the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Thus, as advocates that aim to serve the social/personal, academic and career needs of students within schools it is critical secondary school counselors are knowledgeable of the nuances associated with assisting Latina/o students realize their dreams of enrolling and attending a postsecondary institution.

In this article findings from a qualitative study conducted in South Texas are presented where the American School Counselor Association's (2005) national model was utilized as a framework to further understanding of how school counselors assist and are challenged in assisting Latina/o students in navigating their college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

### **School Counselors and College Access and Choice**

The role of the school counselor today is outlined in the American School Counselor Association's (2005) national model. Within the model, the manner in which

school counselors shape students' college access and choice is particularly evident within their delivery of school guidance curriculum and individual student planning (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Counselors, however, must also respond to the immediate social and emotional needs of students and help facilitate school-wide initiatives while collaborating with school personnel, families, and community entities (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Within the high school setting, some of these various duties should be allocated more time than others. For instance, Gysbers and Henderson (2006) suggest the following time allocation: 15-25% for guidance curriculum, 25-35% for individual student planning, 25-35% for responsive services and 15-20% for system support. Given school counselors' multifaceted role, however, it is no surprise that the quality and quantity of time devoted to assisting students with accessing a postsecondary education can be compromised.

Previous research that has explored the role of school counselors in college access has provided evidence for and shown the effects of this compromise. For instance, counselors have been noted for being inaccessible (Vela-Gude, Cavazos Jr., Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009; Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004), having low expectations of students at times (Vela-Gude et al., 2009), having too many responsibilities and varying roles to be effective (Corwin et al., 2004; McDonough, 2005; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003), and being gatekeepers to college information (González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In some cases students have also indicated counselors' differential treatment of students based on various background characteristics (Corwin et al., 2004; Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009; Venezia

et al., 2003). In Corwin et al.'s (2004) study, one Latino student described how the counselor was "for the white kids and the Asian kids" while the "Mexican kids" sought assistance with college preparations from a particular teacher (p. 452). Alternatively, in Vela-Gude et al.'s (2009) study of Latino students' perceptions of their high school counselors, a Latina recollected "counselors paying more attention to students who came from prestigious or wealthy families." A limitation of Vela-Gude et al.'s (2009) study, however, is that results are based on only eight student interviews.

The notion that school counselors are differential to students based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, whether consciously or subconsciously, is substantiated by the work of Linnehan, Weer, and Stonley (2006). In an effort to uncover whether high school counselors reinforce or pre-empt social class structures, he found "a triple interaction between a student's race, social class and academic performance...to be a significant predictor of counselor recommendations" for postsecondary options (p. 1). This finding is important because it stands in contrast to previous research (McDonough, 1997) identifying socioeconomic status as the main barrier to college access.

### **Latina/o College Access and Choice**

In trying to assist Latina/o students in preparing and planning for college, secondary school counselors must consider a number of things. For one, Latina/o students overwhelmingly rely on parents and siblings for guidance with their college choice process (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Ortiz & Gauvain, 2006; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). Many Latina/o parents, however, often lack a college education themselves and have limited experience with

accessing and applying to postsecondary institutions (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). Therefore, the degree to which Latina/o parents can assist students in this process is limited by their own lack of college knowledge (Ceja, 2001, 2006; Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002), although they help nurture and greatly shape students' college aspirations (Gándara, 1995). Siblings (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002) have been found to provide more tangible college information. Tornatsky et al. (2002) also found that immigration and socioeconomic status play a role in the degree to which Latina/o parents can assist their children with their college choice process. Latina/o parents of higher socioeconomic and third generation status, for instance, had the greatest college knowledge compared to their counterparts who were recent immigrants and of lower socioeconomic status.

Counselors must also be aware of how Latina/o students often negotiate conflicting societal and familial values in accessing and planning their postsecondary education (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). While Latina/o students and their families often view independence and individualism as necessary to succeed in the greater society, within the family, notions of reciprocity and *familismo*, or the tendency to put the needs and wants of family before one's own (Garzón, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), are held in higher regard. Finances are also a key factor considered by many Latina/o students and families when planning postsecondary options. Many Latina/o families, however, often have limited knowledge regarding the financial aid process (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Cunningham and Santiago (2008) also found that Latina/os and Asians, when compared to all other racial/ethnic groups, are less likely to borrow funds

to attend college regardless of institutional type, income status, and whether the student plans to attend full or part time.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) national model provided a framework to examine the role that school counselors played in the college choice process of Latina/o students. In particular, this study took into account the characteristics in which the model is grounded (advocacy, leadership, collaboration, and systemic change) as well as the four ways in which school counselors deliver their services through school counseling and guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support (American School Counseling Association, 2005).

In addition, there were several questions that guided this study. The first being: how did school counselors assist Latina/o students in navigating their college choice process? Did counselors advocate, collaborate, lead, and act as change agents within the school in their attempts to assist Latina/o students with this process? What sorts of issues/challenges were evident that inhibited counselors from carrying out these roles? Were there particular social, cultural, and/or emotional issues or challenges faced by Latina/o students in this process? Finally, what are some considerations for counselors assisting Latina/o students with their college choice process?

### **Method**

This qualitative (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) study specifically utilized a phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2006) where in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews were used as a main source of data collection. A

qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate given the research questions posed and the focus on illuminating the meanings counselors made of their experiences in assisting Latina/o students with their college choice process and the meanings students made of their experiences in accessing counselors in this process (Maxwell, 2005).

## **Participants**

Participants included 5 female secondary school counselors and 20 high school seniors, who identified as Latina/o, all of Mexican descent, and who intended to attend a postsecondary institution upon graduation. Counselors and students were all from one large public school district in South Texas, a district that is 98.6% Latina/o (Texas Education Agency, 2011) and along the U.S.-Mexico border. Four of the counselors worked at the two high school sites for this study, otherwise known as Fortuna high school (Fortuna) and Palacios high school (Palacios), and the fifth counselor worked at the district level. Identified by their pseudonyms, the two counselors at Fortuna were Ms. Elizondo, who had at least 3 years counseling experience, and Ms. Manzano, who had 8 years of counseling experience. Ms. Elizondo was recruited for the study because she was the head counselor, and Ms. Manzano was recruited based on Ms. Elizondo's recommendation. The two counselors at Palacios were Ms. Davila, who had at least 20 years of counseling experience and was designated the "senior counselor," and Ms. Carson, who had 13 years of counseling experience and was designated the "higher education counselor." The two counselors at Palacios were recruited because of their roles in working with seniors. Ms. Jordan, who had 30 years counseling experience, was the higher education counselor for the district. Ms. Jordan was recruited after the



high school counselors recommended her for the study. Five of the four counselors happened to be of Latino descent, and one was White.

Student participants consisted of five males and five females (10 total) from each school. Prior to being interviewed, students' demographic and contact information was obtained through a one-page questionnaire. Data from this questionnaire indicated that all students were either 17 or 18 years of age, and self-identified as either Hispanic or Mexican American. Seven (35%) students were in the top 10% of their class, while thirteen (65%) students were not. Twelve of them were first-generation immigrants, in that both parents were born outside of the U.S., and eleven students (60%) were of first-generation college status. This latter designation was for students who had parent(s) or caretaker(s) who had a high school diploma or less (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

All interviews, except for the one with the district level counselor, were conducted in person and on school grounds. The interview with the district counselor was conducted over the phone because of logistic limitations. Counselors were interviewed once, with interviews lasting between thirty minutes to an hour. Student participants were recruited with the assistance of counselors at the two high school sites. Students were interviewed twice with the first interview focusing on students' college aspirations and their sources of college knowledge and support. The second interview provided students an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on their responses from the first interview, and to discuss their perceptions of how their socio-cultural characteristics shaped their college choice process. Student interviews averaged thirty-nine minutes

long, with the shortest lasting fifteen minutes and the longest forty-five minutes. The length between students' first and second interviews ranged from a month to two months, except for one student whose first and second interview were conducted from one day to the next.

All counselor and student interviews, except for Ms. Jordan's, were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy. The one phone interview with Ms. Jordan was not audio-recorded. However, her responses were transcribed while the interview was being conducted, and Ms. Jordan was prompted throughout the interview to provide any missing information that had not been captured through this transcription process.

Analysis of transcripts was inductive in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) and began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Utilizing one master Microsoft Word document, each transcript was first analyzed separately and chunks of information that were deemed significant in light of the research questions and literature were copied from each transcript and then pasted on the master document. The chunks of information on the master document were organized and identified using their corresponding participants' pseudonym and then provided a code or category name (Creswell, 2009). Each code was defined as it was created, and there was an effort made to adhere to initial definitions of codes to ensure reliability (Creswell, 2009). Once all transcripts were coded, derived codes were compared to identify larger themes and subthemes that reflected multiple student and counselor perspectives and were supported by evidence in the data (Creswell, 2009).

## **Reliability and Validity**

Various measures were taken to ensure the reliability, or dependability, of data in this study. One measure included checking transcripts for any possible errors made during transcription before any analyses were made (Creswell, 2009). During analysis, I also made sure not to deviate from thematic codes once they had been created by regularly comparing data with codes, and by reflecting on the meaning of codes throughout the analysis process (Creswell, 2009).

In order to address issues of validity, the strategy of triangulation was utilized and my bias and positionality as a researcher were acknowledged. Marshall and Rossman (1999) define triangulation as “the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 194). In this study, interviewing both counselors and students provided an opportunity to corroborate data from and illuminate any inconsistencies between the two stakeholder groups (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). It was also critical to acknowledge my own bias and positionality in order to minimize the means by which I could have influenced the data collection and/or analysis process (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). My positionality was informed by my being a Mexican American woman from the South Texas Border. As such, my insider knowledge of the culture and community that was studied assisted me in gaining access to and building trust with participants. At the same time, I did not want my familiarity with and loyalty to South Texas to keep me from critically examining emerging themes in the data. Thus, I remained cognizant of this bias throughout the duration of the study.

## Results

Findings indicated that counselors were in many instances integral in assisting Latina/o students with their college choice process by providing them with access to college information, facilitating visits with university representatives and other college-related functions on campus, and in some cases providing college information through classroom guidance lessons. However, the degree to which counselors could assist Latino students with individual academic and college planning was limited, primarily because of the large number of students each counselor served and their multiple duties. This is consistent with previous research (Corwin et al., 2004; McDonough, 2005; Venezia et al., 2003). Counselors themselves agreed with this sentiment. At the same time, several challenges and issues arose for counselors when working with Latina/o students. For instance, counselors noted the significant role that gender role expectations, *familismo*, financial need, and being of first generation college status had on Latina/o students' college choice process.

### How Counselors Assisted Latina/o Students

All students identified counselors as key resources for college information and assistance. For instance, one Palacios student described how helpful Ms. Carson, the designated higher education counselor at Palacios, was in this regard. He said:

She's been helping us out a lot. She's been helping us with the SAT, the waivers and stuff and she's been like giving us information. She's having like a, what is it called, advisors from colleges coming down. So she's having us like know more about the colleges.

Several other Palacios students specifically referred to a monthly newsletter that Ms. Carson would distribute to students that reminded them of “what’s going on in that month for scholarships or stuff” and of when they “had to sign up for the SAT’s or ACT’s.” At Fortuna, students described how counselors had “a sign up sheet too and you put your, your email address and they’ll send you scholarship information and college information.”

Students at both schools also explained how they could easily obtain college information through the “bulletin boards” in the counselors’ offices that had “information on what college is coming” and through the college brochures and pamphlets that counselors made available for students in their offices. Students could pick-up college materials at their own will without having to make an appointment with a counselor, as students indicated was necessary if they wanted to meet with a counselor individually. Counselors corroborated student responses noting how they provided students with information on and assistance with college entrance exams, financial aid and scholarships, and college applications. The latter is evident from Ms. Elizondo’s comment, “We let them [students] know the different websites, like for example, the testing, what type of testing, where can they go, the testing dates.” She also described how counselors had “different pamphlets of all the scholarships where they [students] can sign up. We have them [students] bring us their email address and that way we can send everything over [to them that way].”

Students also referred to the more common ways in which they were able to directly access assistance from counselors at their designated schools. At Palacios students tended to have more direct access to counselors through classroom visits and

at Fortuna it was through the “senior interview.” Students at Palacios explained Ms. Carson’s classroom visits in the following way:

She also does like a class tour, like she goes to classes and distributes information...Ms. Carson she’s always constantly getting you out, giving you letters saying, about scholarships, deadlines, and everything. Also, [she is often] making, reminding you about the fee waivers, the SATs and all of that.

Ms. Carson herself explained:

I start out in the fall doing classroom presentations to all the English IV teachers because seniors do need to take English IV and during the presentations I share with them the importance of continuing their education...What I do is that I share with them the Texas common app[lication]...I explain to them specifically, they can use that application for any college and how to do it online. And then as far as scholarships, on the newsletters that I do, I distribute [scholarship information]...But sometimes that’s not enough, I go back and do a second round of presentations, to remind them, you know...And then also the financial aid, I’m very specific about the FAFSA.

As the senior counselor at Palacios, Ms. Davila also did classroom presentations, primarily focusing on course planning and college entrance exams. She started working with rising seniors during the spring of their junior year. She said:

In the spring...I go through the classrooms and I basically [discuss] planning for this year’s courses, but in the process I start asking them [students], “Have you taken this test? Have you taken that test?”...And so I start urging them to start taking the tests that they need to go to college.

At Fortuna High School, the counselors met with seniors in what was called the “senior interview.” One student described the interview: “Senior interview is where they, the counselors call you up from our class, you go and they talk to you about what you want to do or like let’s see if you’re gonna graduate.” Ms. Manzano added this:

We do them [senior interviews] in November, because a lot of the [college application] deadlines come up in December...So you know, if they [students] haven’t [applied] we direct them to the [applytexas.org](http://applytexas.org). [We tell students], “Well, you know you need to start looking. You know, as far as the deadlines. When are they due? You know, what do you need to submit?”...And you know, [we ask students], “How far do you want to go? You know, do you want to stay?” Some people say, I want to be able to come home on weekends...And some people say I want to get as far as I can. [I say], “Aye, well there’s no limits there *mijito* [son], you can go wherever.”

Aside from the senior interview, Ms. Elizondo also described how individual meetings with students, when possible, also provided opportunities to guide students in their college choice process. She explained how “guiding them [students]” was necessary, “because a lot of kids don’t know, [and they ask], ‘Okay what do I do now mam? How am I gonna pay this? You know, my parents just lost their job [so] what can we do?’” She further explained how counselors, “as resources” needed to “show them [students] the steps” in the college choice process.

### **Challenges Latina/o Students Faced in Accessing Counselors**

While counselors assisted Latina/o students with their college choice process in a number of ways, students also explained how counselors were overwhelmed with

duties that consequently made them less accessible to them. One female student at Fortuna said, “I rarely go talk to them [counselors]...because they’re always super busy. They’re like always full and right now with the schedule changes. So, it’s really hard to actually sit down and talk to them.” Another female student at Palacios explained how “teachers kind of help me mostly” while “counselors not so much because they’re always usually busy with paperwork and stuff so they don’t really have a chance to talk to you.”

Counselors themselves described the difficulty in being accessible to all “five to six hundred” students each of them served while juggling their various responsibilities. Ms. Manzano shared her frustration with trying to manage her multiple roles as a counselor and believed this jeopardized her ability to provide students with the adequate individual college planning she felt students needed. She explained:

It would be in the perfect world to have one person in charge to try to help these kids [with college preparations] because it does get very overwhelming trying to, you know help this one with the you know, just applying and then you have these kids coming in and [saying,] ‘I need this and I need that’ and you just can’t really give them the help that they should where you can just sit with them and say, ‘Okay, let me help you.’ It’s like, ‘Okay *mijito* [son] start, and I’ll be right back’ and you pull somebody else in and, ‘Ok, you know, well I need credits or I need this or I need that,’ and I go back over there and, ‘Okay *mijito* [son] now where are we at?’

In an ideal world, Ms. Manzano said she “would designate a person to help them [students] with [college planning] for the universities because you know, we don’t



unfortunately have that time.” In similar fashion, Ms. Jordan admitted, “My wish would be to have a financial aid counselor that would do anything about college [sic], regular financial aid counselors [at every high school].” She said, “Having someone like that to help students with applications and give info to ninth to eleventh [grade students]” would help alleviate secondary school counselors’ responsibilities.

### **Challenges Counselors Faced in Assisting Latina/o Students**

**Gender role expectations.** Counselors at both schools noted how gender role expectations impacted Latina/o students’ college choice process and their ability to guide students in this endeavor. For instance, Ms. Carson revealed how she tried advising some Latina students who had said, “If I get married then I won’t have to have a job or get a job.” To this, Ms. Carson said, “I always tell them that you never know. They’re no guarantees in life, you know...So, I try to instill the importance [of a college degree] and how important it is to aspire, and that money should not prevent them from continuing.” Students interviewed, however, did not express such beliefs.

Ms. Elizondo, from Fortuna also shared the following sentiments: “I don’t think that a lot of things have changed [compared to] when I was in school and our expectations before going to college.” She explained, “I still see a lot of the machismo here in our area. You know a lot of the girls, they just want to get married, have kids and that’s it.” Alternatively, “a lot of the boys are expected to work and help parents and that’s priority instead of going to college,” she said. Ms. Elizondo saw this “as a problem” that had to do with “the background [of students], cultural background.” She believed such cultural gender role expectations were still evident “even [among] our kiddos now” and this posed a challenge to their “pursuing, you know, a degree.”

**Familismo.** *Familismo* is the tendency to put the wants and needs of family before one's own; it is a common value upheld in most Latina/o families (Garzón, 2003; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). While in many cases this strong devotion to family provided a source of strength for students, *familismo* was also often a source of tension for Latina/o students wishing to attend a postsecondary institution outside of South Texas. Parents preferred students attend a college or university that was close to home either to maintain close bonds or so students could obtain work while attending college in order to contribute to the family income. This finding was consistent with previous research (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002). Ms. Manzano had seen this happen often and shared her thoughts on the matter:

It's just the Hispanic culture, they [parents] don't want to let go... You can go to [local/regional university] *mijito* [son], you know. And it's that kind of thinking... And then the kids want to please the parents, so they say, 'Ok, I'll stay.' And sometimes, a lot of times it's compromising, they're like, 'Okay well I'll stay a year, and then can I go?' And [then parents are] like, 'Okay, well if you do well the first year, we'll let you go.'

One male student at Palacios explained how he was dealing with such a predicament. After sharing his hopes to attend a university in Central Texas, he divulged his parents' hopes for him: "My dad told me to stay, but my mom she's like, you can go to college, but you can just come to [local/regional university] and you can do better here." Being the only male child in the family, his father, who owned a mechanic shop, had hoped he would "work in the family business." But this student explained, "It's not my thing." Furthermore, this student found it hard to reconcile with

his parents' wishes knowing that he had three older sisters who had all left South Texas to attend college. Another female student at Fortuna also explained how she "wanted to go somewhere far from here [for college]" but her parents did not want her too because they were "kind of like close together." As a compromise, she said would likely "stay in [local/regional university] and there I want to do my basics and then I want to move. It's because I want to be an optometrist." As no optometry schools exist in South Texas, leaving the region would be necessary.

It is evident from student and counselor accounts that Latina/o students straddled conflicting cultural norms in the midst of their college choice process. While students respected their parents' wishes and their Latina/o cultural values of staying physically close to family, students also sought the experience of physically leaving home to attend college and being more independent as this was what was valued and deemed necessary for success within their American culture. Counselors therefore advocated on behalf of students in this pursuit.

**Financial need and first generation college status.** All counselors deemed socioeconomic status as a major factor that shaped Latina/o students' college choice process. This challenge was even more pronounced for students who were also the first in their families to pursue a postsecondary degree, or first generation college students, because they and their families were often less financially literate.

Ms. Elizondo, for example said, "Most of them [Latina/o students] will say financial, financial problems" are the biggest concern in planning for college. She expressed that this was an issue for both students who had parents with "good careers" as well as "all the other kids that...[come] from a low income family." Ms. Jordan, the

higher education counselor for the district, shared similar thoughts, but also revealed her beliefs regarding the plight of accessing a higher education for Latina/o students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. She explained:

We're 94.999% economically disadvantaged, so 95% will find all the money to go to college. They're sitting on an educational lottery ticket. They just need to do three things to cash in this ticket. One, they have to apply to a college, [and two they] need to do required testing...[and three] apply for financial aid.

Ms. Jordan's comment implies that while Latina/o students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may view finances as a major barrier to attending college, the real barrier is in actually following through with the three steps that she notes. However, Ms. Jordan failed to consider the lack of federal assistance available for Latina/o students who may be undocumented, and she assumed that all students are familiar with these necessary steps and how to successfully complete them.

Students at both high schools shared their concerns over financial need. One student said, "The family income, I do see it as a challenge because we don't bring in as much so that poses, so that like says I really need to work hard...to try to get scholarships and grants." Another student shared how finances particularly shaped his college aspirations and planning:

I think before one of the biggest challenge[s] was one of the whole financial idea. You know like am I gonna have to pay for everything or am I actually gonna be able to get financial aid. You know. I think like my dad doesn't win that much, he doesn't get that much so is he gonna have to pay for everything and if he does have to pay for, maybe not everything, but most of it, or you know a certain part

of it, is he gonna be able to, and if he's not is he gonna be like, 'Ok, well then I guess you can't go to college,' you know. So, I guess that in the planning you know, I had to search for you know, which college or university offered what, you know. Like [one Texas flagship institution] the guy said if it's less than 40 thousand a year, we'll pay for everything and it's, it's like scholarship, it's not something you have to pay back. So, I mean obviously I want to take advantage of that opportunity.

Being a first generation college student also influenced Latina/o students' college aspirations in other ways. For instance, Ms. Davila at Palacios believed students whose parents had gone to college were "more prone to want to go to college." Ms. Carson also shared some of her experiences:

I've had some students that have said, let's say their parents didn't go to college, no one in their family, so they might feel that, that maybe it's not a reality, that that background...that would prevent them [from going]...And then on the other hand, you have families, you have students who [are] actually the only one who will be attending college and of course and you know, their parents have instilled that in them, that, 'Hey, you look at me, I did not go any further, but we want you to go and we want you to be afforded that opportunity.' But sometimes students might think that because the family did not attend, or had the opportunity, well maybe I won't either.

Ms. Manzano added, "I have had kids tell me, 'Well my dad just wants me to graduate [from high school] because he wants me to work.' You know, and I'm like, No you need to college." She said in this case the student responded by saying, "But my

dad says why, they didn't go to college and they're fine." Ms. Manzano believed that there were different parental expectations for college set by parents of first generation Latina/o college students, some of which come from lower income households. She explained further saying, "It's the backgrounds they're coming from. The expectations are very different." "And not saying that the lower socioeconomic [parent] doesn't expect them [students] to go to college," she added, "but I think there's more of a number saying, 'Hey, I'm doing okay, you know' and [the parents] don't really expect it." She concluded her thoughts saying, "And the kids will tell you, well you know I never really thought about it, my parents didn't say that. And where you talk to the other kids...It's kind of like following traditions and expectations."

### **Considerations for Counselors Working With Latina/o Students**

Findings from this study are not generalizable to all other contexts, although the following considerations may be useful and applicable to counselors working in similar schools and communities as those in this study and/or with Latina/o students facing similar challenges in their college choice process.

### **Heterogeneity Within the Latina/o Student Population**

The student bodies at both Fortuna and Palacios High schools are predominantly Latina/o, 95.5% and 98.0% respectively (Texas Education Agency, 2011), and reflect the racial/ethnic make-up of the entire district and South Texas region. Given the close proximity of this region to the U.S.-Mexico border, most residents are also of Mexican descent. Yet while South Texas is majority Latina/o, student and counselor narratives reveal the great heterogeneity within the Latina/o, and even Mexican descent student population that can be based on English language proficiency, nativity, class,

generational college status, recency of migration to the U.S., academic ability, and religion. As such, counselors must be cognizant of such distinctions when working with Latina/o students and how such factors can shape students' college choice process. Secondary counselors serving Latina/o students of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, or Salvadoran descent, for instance, might find other within or between group differences that also impact students' college choice process.

### **Role of Family is Nuanced and Complex**

Secondary counselors must be cognizant of the nuanced role that families play in the lives of Latina/o students. Latina/o students' sense of obligation to family, in terms of staying close to home for college, contributing to family income, and/or obtaining a higher education in honor of parents/family can greatly influence their college choice process and make it particularly difficult to negotiate. As an advocate of all children, counselors must be aware of how their advice may or may not be in accordance with a student's cultural and familial values and/or expectations. For instance, Ms. Manzano was aware of her influence on some students particularly "the lower income kids whose parents probably didn't finish high school or college, or finished high school but didn't go to college." She explained how these are the students "you guide a little bit more" because "they have no sense of how do I apply, where do I apply, you know, how do I get the money, what classes do I take, who do I talk to." In such cases, Ms. Manzano admitted "trying to convince them [some Latina/o students who want to leave the region for college], or persuade them, because the parents are saying, 'Don't go, don't go.' You know we're saying, 'Yes go, it's an experience.'" In similar situations, counselors must consider the extent to which they urge Latina/o students to attend a particular institution

even though it may be against parents' wishes. After all, as Ms. Manzano noted "for some it turns out good and some of them go and come back and say you know I just, x amount of reasons I couldn't." In the event that a student does return, Ms. Manzano believed this was "fine" because "at least you [the student] tried."

### **Relationships Built on Trust, Respect, and Authentic Care**

Some Latina/o students described how they could not turn to counselors, not particularly because they were inaccessible to them, but because students had "a closer relationship with teachers" or other individuals in their lives that they felt they could turn to in negotiating their college choice process. This finding coincides with previous research indicating Latina/o students' and families' value social relationships both inside and outside the school setting that are built on *confianza*, or mutual trust, and *respeto*, respect (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). In sharing her suggestions on how school counselors could better assist Latina/o students with their academic and postsecondary plans, one student said: "I think it would be better if they [counselors] would go actually sit and talk to the people [students]."

Albeit students appreciated counselors providing them with college-focused information, counselors must not underestimate the need to provide students with individualized attention when they seek it. For instance, another student expressed his dismay after having attended a college fair and being consistently told to seek further information on the college's website. He said, "Everything she [college representative] was telling me was, 'Well, just visit the website.' So we were kind of discouraged by that because everything she would tell us, 'Oh, just go visit they're website.'" While this student was not seeking assistance from a counselor, this example does suggest that



students do not want to simply be referred to an online resource when they are seeking individual assistance. Secondary school counselors working with Latina/o students must recognize the need to meet with Latina/o students individually, as doing so will provide an opportunity to build a trusting relationship with students and convey that counselors authentically care about students' success in school and beyond.

### **Latina/o Students Internalize Systemic Inequities**

Overwhelmingly, the Latina/o students interviewed placed the responsibility of preparing for college and accessing college information and opportunities on themselves. Thus, when Latina/o students were unable to obtain such information and assistance, the participants blamed the students instead of the system or school personnel. One student said, "Most people don't take the time to actually go and get that information that they need." Another student said this:

Well, it's not really like the school, like it's the student, like if you want to get the information, you have to look for the information, you have to ask about it, like, not everyone's gonna like just tell you about it. Like I had to like ask my counselors. It wasn't until this year when they started talking to us more about the different opportunities and like colleges, but I had to like ask the counselors and teachers around, like it's really just the student's responsibility. Like if you want to go to college, you have to try, you have to go get the stuff.

While findings suggest that counselors were restricted in their abilities to assist students with their individual academic college and career planning due to greater systemic inequities, students maintained their positive views of counselors and instead internalized such shortcomings. Secondary school counselors must be aware of this

issue, and not succumb to deficit thinking in which they blame Latina/o students for not successfully accessing a higher education when in fact systemic forces that are beyond their control place them at an unfair disadvantage.

### **Discussion**

There is no doubt that the secondary school counselors in this study were advocates of Latina/o students in the midst of their college choice process. However, counselors were clearly overburdened with multiple duties, some of which were not counseling related, and large caseloads that in essence left them feeling powerless in changing their plight within the school system. As the ASCA national model (2005) suggests, counselors can position themselves to be leaders on their campus that can effect systemic change. In doing so, however, counselors must advocate on their own behalf making teachers, administrators, and other school staff aware of their roles and duties, and how strategically collaborating with teachers and administrators is the only way they can successfully carry out all aspects of the delivery system.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was limited in both its scope and sample. The study specifically examined how secondary school counselors at two traditional, public high schools assisted Latina/o students from South Texas in navigating their college choice process. Furthermore, these Latina/o students all happened to be of Mexican descent. Future studies could examine how secondary school counselors assist Latina/o students who are not of Mexican descent (i.e., Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, etc.) to illuminate any distinctions within the Latino student population.

Additionally, only five counselors were interviewed for this study, four of which were of Latina/o descent. Subsequent studies could include a larger number of counselors from other varied racial/ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, it would be helpful to interview counselors in a community that is not majority Latina/o as is South Texas. This would provide counselors who may not regularly work with Latina/o students the opportunity to discuss whether and how they might be lacking in knowledge as it pertains to meeting the academic and postsecondary planning needs of Latina/o students. Secondary school administrators could also be interviewed in future research to determine their understandings of the systemic barriers that limit secondary school counselors' ability to meet the needs of all students, and Latina/o students in particular.

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Melissa A. Martinez, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Educational and Community Leadership Program at Texas State University-San Marcos. She is a native of the Rio Grande Valley, and a former bilingual elementary school teacher and school counselor with the Austin Independent School District. She earned her Ph.D. in Educational Administration, with a concentration in Higher Education, from The University of Texas at Austin in 2010 and earned her B.A. (1998) and M.Ed. (2002) at The University of Texas at Brownsville. Her research focuses on three areas: 1) equity and access issues along the P-16 educational pipeline for students of color, primarily college access and readiness issues for Latina/os and Latina/o parent engagement, 2) pedagogical practices utilized in the preparation of future educational leaders, and 3) the experiences of faculty of color in academia.