

Introduction

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ON MY WAY TO COLLEGE

I begin with my personal story to illustrate how some Latinos get socialized to attend college.

Before my junior year in high school, I do not recall hearing the word *college* in a way that seemed meaningful in planning my future. I disliked school since elementary school. I loved learning, but I did not like school. However, good grades were my incentive. Not only did my parents expect it, but also I think I liked the competition. My parents instilled a strong work ethic that transferred to the way I approached learning in school. Discipline, responsibility, and working conscientiously were the underlying principles. Although they spoke limited English, my parents trusted my sisters and me to keep track of our academic progress because we, not they, knew how schools worked. In spite of that, Mom showed up at every school meeting and insisted that we always work to the best of our ability.

During middle and high school, I was a good student but I always had to fight my way out of remedial classes. The Iowa Standardized Test scores determined students' placement in academic classes. I always scored at the lowest of my peer group. Following the reporting of the test scores, my high school counselor called me into her office and shared with me my results. I always placed 99th percentile on mechanical ability. Nice, if I wanted to work in a garage, but my low academic scores in language placed me in remedial classes.

Every first week of fall classes, I found myself nodding off in the remedial language arts class where the teacher stood in front of the class and dictated a list of spelling words such as "truck" and "baseball." I looked around the class and my classmates

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were falling asleep with their heads on their desks. Although my mother did not have the opportunity to attend high school, she always taught us to advocate for ourselves. So I inevitably ended up in the office of the high school counselor, Mrs. Nichols. I complained about the boring class and reminded her that I had always received good grades in the advanced English and literature classes. She looked up my file and said, “Oh, we do need to get you into another class.” She always found a spot for me in the advanced classes. After my mother’s expectation of me to advocate for myself, the credit goes to Mrs. Nichols. If she had paid attention only to my standardized test results, I would never have been able to demonstrate that I could master advanced coursework.

I loved the challenge in my physics, literature, and trigonometry classes. When trigonometry felt like a bigger challenge than I could handle, my father tutored me. He had not even finished first grade in Mexico because he was stepping over dead bodies on his way to school during the revolution.

I was a junior in high school when my older sister was preparing to graduate from high school and planning to attend a local college, but we didn’t talk much about her actual college experience. At school, college was the only conversation among my friends. Teachers prepared us for the SAT tests, and counselors advised students on how to apply for college. Lunchtime talks with my friends sounded overwhelming and confusing as they shared their excitement and fears about applying to the colleges that their parents wanted them to attend. I just listened and felt relieved that I wasn’t going to have to go through all that stress. Although I was an excellent student, loved learning and studying, and like my friends, was in the Scholastic Society and the top of our class, college was not in my plans. We were all in the Scholastic Society, top of our class, but college eluded me. I did not have plans to attend college.

I intended to graduate and continue working at Bullock’s Department Store, where the manager in our department had invited me to be her assistant. I also planned to marry my high school boyfriend at some point. Mrs. Nichols changed all that when she called me into her office. She said that I was in the top ten of our graduating class and that Whittier College, a local private college, was offering scholarships to the top ten students in our graduating class, allowing us to take interesting college

classes during our senior year. It was an opportunity for us to take classes that might interest us and become acquainted with college life.

I was never one to shy away from a challenge, so I jumped on board. In my senior year, I had enough units to graduate and could take advantage of the offer that Whittier College made to us. I took a sociology class and loved the readings and class discussions.

The Whittier College experience stirred my curiosity about attending college after graduating. Occidental College seemed like a good place to go because it was within commute distance, so I applied. Again, Mrs. Nichols called me into her office with news. “The University of the Pacific (UOP) in Stockton is offering a four-year scholarship to a bilingual student interested in majoring in InterAmerican Studies at their Covell College, an experimental international program. You’re a very good student and if you apply, I think you have a good chance of getting the award.”

My head exploded with questions beginning with, where is Stockton? “Near Sacramento,” said Mrs. Nichols. That was my opportunity to leave smoggy Los Angeles. Sure, I loved my family, but the idea that someone might pay me to explore worlds away from Los Angeles thrilled me. Oh, what I could learn! The scholarship was for tuition and room and board. I would still have to work part-time for my personal needs. . . . Not a problem. I was not a stranger to work.

My mother agreed that I should apply, but we didn’t tell my father for fear that he would squelch my dream. He was not in favor of his daughters moving out of home unless it was for marriage. By now, I had put that plan to rest.

At the time, finances were very tough for my family, so I didn’t feel comfortable asking them for the money for the application. I saved a little bit from my part-time job, but it wasn’t enough for the fee. When I shared that with my English teacher, she loaned me \$50.00 for the application. I paid her back the following week with my check from my part-time job at Bullocks.

Within a few weeks, I received an acceptance letter from Occidental College. They accepted me but only offered a very small scholarship. I didn’t respond to their offer until I heard from University of the Pacific (UOP). That letter arrived two weeks later. They accepted me and offered me a full four-year

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academic scholarship with one condition—that I would maintain above-average academic standing. Tears filled our house that night, mine with excitement and my parents with dread. They knew I couldn't turn down such an opportunity, but nothing prepared them for letting me go. They kept asking me why I couldn't attend a local college like my older sister. No explanation satisfied them. My mother accompanied me to the meeting when the UOP recruiters visited our area. The meeting was important because we both got to understand a bit more about what college life offered and what it meant to live in a dorm and the work opportunities available.

Dad had to work, so he couldn't drive me up to college in the fall. My mother, her friend and I packed up my boxes and I took the Greyhound bus up eight hours north to Stockton. The real shock was when I arrived in Stockton, where the 108 degree heat and the less-than-attractive Greyhound station overwhelmed me. Suddenly, I longed for Los Angeles. But UOP's lovely brick-and-ivy buildings quickly restored my excitement. After that initial visit to the Greyhound station, I would revisit it many times when I made trips home to visit my family. My tight student budget sometimes meant that I had to donate blood for \$5.00 each time I had to buy a Greyhound ticket. It was worth it because I had to heal my fractured relationship with my father, who disliked the idea of me being so far from home. But years later, when he attended my graduations from UOP then Stanford, he couldn't be prouder that his daughter had college degrees.

When did you first hear the word *college*? Did you hear it from your parents? From a high school counselor? When did you first decide that you were going to college? Who helped you to make your decision? How did you know what college you wanted to attend? If your parents did not have college experience, who coached you on the road to college? How did you choose your major and your career goals? All these questions lead us to ask, whose responsibility is it to socialize, orient, and prepare students to successfully pursue college?

The subject of getting underrepresented Latinos to college is of great concern for me. Working in Latino communities has taught me that we need to get the next generation of Latinos to college and into professions that can raise the well-being not only of their own families but also of the community at large. My professional roles as a teacher, principal,

educational and community ethnographic researcher and professor at the University of California have given me the privilege to hear countless stories that together comprise a portrait of the educational situation that Latinos face getting to college. Along the way, I have become convinced that understanding the college experience begins before students enter kindergarten. Therefore, the school's role in socializing Latino students to college must begin the minute they enter school. This does not mean that students cannot learn about the college process later in middle and high school; it means that Latinos whose parents do not have the educational background have some catching up to do with parents who socialize their children for college from birth. By reaching parents, they reach other children in their families and help prepare students so that the responsibility does not all rest on educators. The education cycle, including students, educators, and parents, needs to be cohesive. Thus, explicit messages about college must begin as early as possible. Some schools as well as local and national programs have found ways to intervene and redirect this trend with Latino students.

The world economy is dependent on the fields of technology and science. That is also the direction of the U.S. economy and in which Latinos must be fully prepared to participate. Schools need to increase the number of students entering college. Currently, four out of ten mainstream students enter college. Many students who have not had opportunities to attend college are Latinos from below-poverty-level households, where parents are not college graduates. California is one of several states where Latinos are the largest growing group. Latino students in California now constitute the majority in public schools. Although they are the fastest growing group in the United States (Gándara, 2010; U.S. Census, 2010), they are the least likely to attain a college degree. The grim reality is that without a college degree, secure employment in the workforce becomes less attainable since entry requirements have escalated.

Achieving college readiness has become a national imperative. Reinforcing that point, Charles Reed, Chancellor of the California State University system, stated that 44 percent of jobs in the current job market require a baccalaureate degree. Given that reality, by the sixth grade, students should be prepared for college (Reed, 2010). In their recent, best-selling book, journalist Thomas Friedman and professor Michael Mandelbaum (2011) argue that a strong U.S. economy requires investment in the education of all students, including those who need more supports to succeed, because they are the future workforce. Students must be prepared to attend college both for themselves and to strengthen the economic system.

The talents of many young students go unrecognized when we fail to create supportive paths to get them there. To help get Latino students

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enter and graduate from college, we need to institutionalize a path for them to follow. We need to raise consciousness among students, educators, and parents through creating systemic approaches in the school curriculum and clear avenues for students to follow from elementary through high school.

An explicit goal of the Common Core State Standards is to ensure that every student achieves college and career readiness. In a knowledge-based economy, the most desirable careers demand the higher order thinking skills that are emphasized in the Common Core. Whether a student chooses to attend college or not, the underlying assumption of the Common Core is that she should be fully prepared to enter college upon graduating high school (Burriss & Garrity, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Socializing students toward college encompasses certain key pillars; among them, cultivating an academic, social, and emotional environment where educators' high expectations support accelerated academic practices such as tutoring and mentoring services that partner with families and communities. These activities constitute a college culture. Incorporating college culture in the K–12 standards prepares students to enter college and pursue twenty-first-century careers.

Various lifelong factors contribute to the obstacles that Latino students face in considering college. *Lifelong* is an appropriate term to describe the process required for students to know what is expected of them on the path to college. That process spans from the time they are toddlers to the time they receive their college admission letter. Students' whose parents have attended college have an advantage where preparing their children for college is concerned. By the time some of these students begin preschool, they have been told that they will be attending college. Some have already selected a college. Even if some children may not understand the full significance, we hear them boast excitedly about their decision.

Unfortunately, with few exceptions, the educational system is not fully organized to address college preparedness until high school. However, by high school, Latino students' post–high school future may have already been decided for them. They have either been tracked toward college or a nonacademic direction. Students who are not in college-bound classes are unlikely to apply for college. This is often the case for all students who may be academically weak before high school because if they do not qualify for advanced classes they are academically unprepared for college. Many of these students become emotionally defeated having remained in remedial classes for much of their schooling. Thus, dropping out of school becomes

easier. While these conditions apply to various ethnic groups from low-socioeconomic communities, the focus of the book is on underserved Latino students because they are the largest growing group in the United States.

Educators and families need to work together to promote the highest student achievement. Parental values play a major role in shaping their children's academic success, choices for college, and pursuit of a career. Going to college is unquestioned in many families. But among Latinos from underrepresented communities, students may feel unprepared for college. They may not have the academic preparation to socialize their children by instructing them to make appropriate academic decisions. Students may come from families whose parents have not attended college. Those parents may want their children to attend so that they can improve their options for employment. Students whose parents are unfamiliar with the educational system and ways to prepare them for the long road ahead need to seek extra support from educators and community members. Even if some students are academically advanced, they will not attend college without the necessary support.

In spite of this gap between the knowledge about college and the resources, there are Latino parents who support their children emotionally and encourage them to stay in school and succeed academically because they believe that during hard times in one's life, no one can take your education from you. Their strong message to their children conveys a belief that when you have an education you have more choices in life. Parents' hopes emerge from an expectation and faith that their children will break the cycle of poverty in their family.

The heart of this book builds on the premise that it is imperative that Latinos attend college and build human capital—the workforce. Effective academic and social support practices intertwine with increased expectations, successfully leading underrepresented Latino students to college and nurturing human capital. Connectedness of cultural, emotional, informational, and instrumental networks undergirds students' readiness and aptitude. In this way, students avail themselves of all the possible academic and social opportunities provided to them to seek resources outside of their immediate settings. Building on these notions, children need to begin seeing themselves college bound as early as kindergarten.

ON WRITING THIS BOOK

One of the most inspiring parts of writing this book has been hearing the personal stories and experiences of students, educators, and family

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members involved at various levels of preparing students to college. Personal story plays an important role in putting a good face on the situation at hand. After all, stories are about people's real-life experiences, how we communicate with each other, how we perceive our status in our communities, and how we make meaning of our educational experience that leads us to our future career. Some parents work two or three jobs to help their child to be the first to realize the dream of going to college. Educators, too, maintain hopes for these students that others might dismiss. The power that all their stories hold helps us uncover common ground and understand that we can collaborate to create a strong road for students to follow from their early years until they reach the college doors.

Wherever possible throughout the text, I include personal narratives of students, parents, and/or educators' perspectives and experiences. In all the stories that I collected, I use pseudonyms because that was my agreement with all the people interviewed. Many stories throughout the book were collected during various research projects that began with a larger educational focus. Others came from independent interviews that my research assistants and I conducted in several states where I had access to students, educators, and parents, including California, Texas, Illinois, Iowa, Colorado, Utah, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C. I tried to obtain interviews representative of small and large schools as well as from urban, suburban, and rural areas. One exception to using pseudonyms is first-person narratives from the Internet where individuals listed their real names. In those cases, I cited the source.

As important as college is as a destination, the process is equally critical. Furthermore, it is very complex and should be one that is discernible for students whose parents do not have a history of college in their family. In my story, we see that Mrs. Nichols is a supportive counselor. Yet the fact that I, as an excellent student in advanced classes, made it to the eleventh grade without much information about college and the complicated application process implies that the school expected students to understand the college application process independently. How did my friends know all about college as they discussed where they would apply? Their parents were professionals or they were knowledgeable about college and were able to coach. Other important players in my story are my Latino classmates in those remedial classes that I was able to leave and they stayed. No one advocated for them. They probably felt the same way I did in that classroom—bored and uninspired to learn. But that's what happens when the educational system disempowers students. By the time they reach high school, they have given up. My classmates and I shared an ethnicity and a socioeconomic status—living in the same neighborhood. However, the difference was that I had family and friends around

me that would not let me feel beaten down. I had people who encouraged and challenged me. There is no substitute for a personal cheering squad that believes in the student's potential, regardless. That I loved learning helped. And that is teachable.

Family support, socioeconomic conditions, social networks, and supportive school personnel are key components in a student's path to college. Although I was one of the first to attend college in my family that does not mean that my parents did not support the idea of college. From our early school years, Mom involved herself in everything she could, including Parent–Teacher Conferences, Back-to-School Night and countless other parent events at school to stay on top of our performance. Dad, with his knowledge of math, was an incredible tutor for me. Although his fear during the Mexican Revolution robbed him of opportunities to attend school, he had innate intelligence. Their support held us to high expectations to get a career. In our family, education had a purpose beyond employment that included proper conduct in and out of the family, good work ethic, learning as much as you can, and being a valued citizen in one's workplace and community. Certainly, that was my mother's constant reminder to my sisters and me.

AFTER THIS INTRODUCTION

Eight more chapters follow this introduction. They do not provide recipes for how schools should do “schooling for Latinos.” Instead I have three major goals: (1) for educators to reflect on the importance of preparing Latino students for college; (2) to offer examples and lessons from certain communities that show how educators deal with this need; and (3) to describe successful partnerships that schools, nonprofit organizations, and university collaborations have fashioned to facilitate the path to college. Below is a preview of the chapters. Throughout the book, I will call the reader's attention to some key questions that educators can ask themselves about their own setting. I also include specific details that emphasize the crux of the story from various settings. Here's a preview of the chapters to come.

Chapter 2: Influences in Getting Latinos to College

A disproportionately large percentage of Latinos live in conditions of poverty and Latino boys and girls attend low-performing, underresourced schools. These circumstances present obstacles that preclude them from succeeding in public schools and consequently from pursuing postsecondary education. I'll present the most salient of these conditions.

Chapter 3: Promising Educational Practices

Specific educational practices promote the necessary academic and social conditions for getting Latino students to college. They include (1) high expectations; (2) the goal of college attendance; (3) promoting rigorous course taking and academic excellence; (4) college tours, visits, or fairs to help students from elementary and secondary levels better plan for college; (5) parental involvement as a goal; and (6) early outreach beginning as early as fourth grade. These practices invite personal stories about students' experiences in creating maximum learning opportunities.

Chapter 4: Talking College in Elementary School

In the absence of systematic elementary-level curriculum for orienting students toward college, educators, including teachers, principals, and counselors, describe their efforts to shape self-esteem in Latino students along with academic and career planning.

Chapter 5: College Readiness in Middle and Secondary School

Transitioning from middle school to high school is a critical part of ensuring students' success on their path to college. Students have opportunities to participate in college-bound programs. I describe specific pillars necessary for strengthening students' academic achievement, such as school programs, including the Breakthrough Collaborative that sometimes partners with nonprofit organizations. I highlight lessons that schools and communities can integrate into their educational programs.

Chapter 6: Features and Activities of Successful Programs

Key nonprofit programs have a strong reputation for succeeding in preparing students for college. Among these programs are Upward Bound, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), East Bay Consortium (EBC), and the Breakthrough Collaborative. Public schools can glean important lessons from these projects to incorporate into their school curriculum such as mentor programs, parent involvement, and tutorials.

Chapter 7: Collaborations and Partnerships

Public schools establish effective partnerships with nonprofit organizations to help Latino students get to college. The four programs discussed here, Hidalgo Independent Schools, Puente, and GEAR UP, represent different

models of operation. Although schools and nonprofit programs differ widely in the way they organize their collaboration, educators can glean important guidance from the different partnership models.

Chapter 8: College Planning With Parents

Parents of Latino students often find schools intimidating, making it difficult to learn how to best support their children to get to college. On the other hand, teachers and other school personnel feel that they would like to communicate more closely with parents but are often unsuccessful. Here I present what parents tell me they would like from the schools. In turn, I share what successful teachers do to engage parents to join with them in helping students prepare for college.

Chapter 9: Students Navigating the College Culture

Personal and emotional information about college issues may not always make it into traditional college guides. Sometimes students without a family tradition of college experience may not even know the questions to ask. This chapter provides a resource for school personnel to address Latino students' needs. I include sample questions around fears of failure, family approval, and of some wisdom that students say they need as they prepare for college. School personnel can provide information to Latino students through various means, including informational workshops, written guides, study groups, and college counseling.

Chapter 10: Sites for Educators, Students, and Families

Websites and other contact sites are included in this chapter.

References

This section lists the references cited in the text.

NOTE TO THE READER

My decision to describe the educational trajectory of Latinos is intentional; it is a way to explore more in-depth, historically and culturally, how one ethnic group of students navigates their way to college. The reader will notice, however, that much of the discussion throughout this book is also applicable to other groups who face obstacles in getting to college. They too would benefit from effective, supportive programs that challenge them to reach for the rungs on the ladder to attain their goal—college.