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Abstract

Parents who have not had opportunities to attend college themselves have neither experience with the process of college preparation and college going nor sufficient access to needed information. This article describes a collaborative venture between a university department of education and a cluster of local schools designed to help parents of first-generation students become active participants in their children's college preparation and planning, shedding light on the importance of parental involvement in the college-going process.

Resumen

Padres que no han tenido oportunidad de ir a la universidad no tienen experiencia con el proceso de preparación, con la asistencia a la universidad, ni con el acceso a información necesaria. Este artículo describe la colaboración entre el departamento de educación en una universidad y un grupo de escuelas locales designadas a ayudar a padres de estudiantes universitarios de primera generación a participar activamente en la preparación y planeación universitaria de sus hijos; ésta iluminó la importancia de la involucración paterna en el proceso universitario.

Keywords

Latino students, Latino parents, parental involvement, parent participation, P-20 collaboration, P-16 collaboration, postsecondary education, college access, Hispanic

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Introduction

Latino families value educational achievement and have aspirations for their children to continue education beyond high school. In a study conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, of 1,054 Latino parents interviewed in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, 96% said they expected their children to attend college (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). A study by the Pew Hispanic Center (2004) revealed a similar finding, 95% of Latino parents indicated that it was “very important” to them that their children go to college. Research has shown that parental support and encouragement is one of the most important—if not *the* most important—indicators of students’ educational aspirations (Auerbach, 2002; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Students who are strongly encouraged by their parents to attend college are much more likely to attend 4-year institutions than students who do not receive that support from their families (Hossler et al., 1999; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Students take their cues from their parents about what is reasonable to expect for their educational goals, and they plan their futures accordingly (Attinasi, 1989; Auerbach, 2002; Ceja, 2004; Pérez, 1999; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

However, parental levels of education and familiarity with the U.S. education system play a significant role in parents’ college knowledge and the repertoire of traditional resources they have available to help their children prepare for enrollment in higher education (Attinasi, 1989; McDonough, 1997; Oliva, 2008; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Torrez, 2004). Unfortunately, parents of students who have not had opportunities to attend college themselves have neither experience with the process of college preparation and college going nor sufficient access to needed information. Parents have deeply felt needs for basic information about college, including information that will help them understand the salient differences between types of institutions, admissions requirements, and financial aid (McDonough, 1997, 1999, Oliva, 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Torrez, 2004; Zarate & Pachón, 2006). Lack of college knowledge, structural barriers, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system make it especially challenging for many Latino parents to help their children prepare for college (Auerbach, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Torrez, 2004).

This article describes the design and execution of a project titled “Parent Knowledge and Participation in the Creation of a College Culture,” with a particular emphasis on the experiences of Latino parents in the project. Our ultimate intention was to enable greater numbers of parents in one urban school district to become active participants in their children’s college preparation and choice processes. As a collaborative venture between a university department of education and a cluster of local schools with a significant Latino population, the project sheds valuable light on the importance of parental involvement in college planning and the ways in which such involvement, particularly in the Latino community, might be encouraged.

Review of the Literature

Decades of research have shown that family involvement is an important contributor to students' educational success (Bloom, 1964, 1981; Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Clark, 1983; Epstein, 2001; Goodson & Hess, 1975; Henderson, 1987; Jeynes, 2007; Moles, 1987; Rich, 1985; Rich, Mattox, & Van Dien, 1979; U.S. Department of Education, 1986; Walberg, 1984; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). Parental involvement has been shown to have a positive association with several outcomes, including higher academic achievement, sense of well-being, school attendance, both student and family perceptions of school climate, student willingness to undertake academic work, quantity of parent and student interaction, student grades, aspirations for higher education, and parent satisfaction with teachers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Jeynes, 2007).

But what do we mean when we say "parental involvement?" This phrase can refer to a range of activities including, but not necessarily limited to, advisory roles for parents, attendance at meetings and events, training in parenting skills, home-based educational preparedness activities, behavioral modeling on the part of parents for children, and policy advocacy (Moles, 1993; Zarate, 2007). As it relates to college preparation, parental involvement can range from frequent discussions between parent and child about expectations and hopes for the future to careful financial planning for college and to college campus visits as a family (Hossler et al., 1999). As such, there are many opportunities for parents to raise their children's expectations about their future educational goals by getting involved with their schools.

Not only is there an opportunity for partnerships between parents and schools to have an impact on first-generation Latino students' aspirations and preparation for college but there is a great need as well. Research on Latino parent involvement in college preparation and planning has shown that despite high expectations for educational attainment, relatively few parents have access to meaningful information to help them understand the process (Oliva, 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Torrez, 2004). Recent and first-generation immigrant parents are less likely to have access to needed information on college preparation and planning compared with second- and third-generation Latino parents; and although language is frequently a barrier, parents may not feel entitled or comfortable approaching school staff to ask questions, may not know what to ask, and may be prevented from contacting school staff during regular school hours because of nontraditional work schedules (Tornatzky et al., 2002). These factors are complicated by cultural issues, including the perceptions of Latino parents about their own role in education. That entails a combination of academic involvement and "life education," or guiding children's education beyond the classroom (Zarate, 2007), and the unique direct and indirect means by which parents communicate the importance of going to college to their children (Auerbach, 2002; Ceja, 2004).

Despite these obstacles, however, most parents are anxious for more information and eager to support their children as they navigate their educational journeys (Chapleau, 2000; McDonough, 1999; Oliva, 2008; Pérez, 1999; Tierney & Auerbach,

2005; Torrez, 2004). Although we might expect that schools would provide this much-needed information, we also know that college counselors and teachers often feel desperate for basic and up-to-date information on college types, standardized exams, and ever-changing admissions rules (McDonough, 1997). Moreover, a major challenge for schools is lack of organizational focus and knowledge about how to design meaningful ways for parents to become involved (Oliva, 2008; Zarate, 2007) and lack of cultural knowledge and sensitivity on how to communicate with and involve Latino parents (Noguera, 1998, 2003; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Pérez, 1999). With this in mind, the remainder of this document describes the development and execution of a series of college-planning workshops that were created collaboratively with parents and educators in four racially diverse middle schools. The project was based on the notion that parents must be active partners with their children in navigating the path to college. Although parents from a wide range of racial and ethnic groups participated in the project, our primary focus here is on the experiences of Latino parents. The following sections describe the theoretical framework, goals, and the context for the project.

Theoretical Framework

The Parent Knowledge and Participation in the Creation of a College Culture project was based on the premise that social capital is a central resource that parents have and can use to help their children in college preparation and planning. Social capital is a resource made up of social connections that are convertible, in this instance, into information and other resources necessary for getting students into college. Parental social capital is multidimensional (Terrion, 2006), derived from extended family networks (Coleman, 1988; Pérez & McDonough, 2008), larger community networks (Coleman, 1988), and formal institutions such as K-12 schools and colleges and universities (Noguera, 1998, 2003). Specifically, in this article, we use a social capital framework as a lens to look at the social networks of Latino parents and the role of the schools in promoting social capital that results in increased knowledge about the critical tasks required for getting into college. According to Noguera (1999), schools have the potential to generate and develop social capital within a community and can be either negative (reproducing the marginality of Latino parents within schools and severely limiting opportunities for educational attainment) or positive (providing forms of cultural capital that are highly useful in accessing higher education). To provide positive social capital, schools must forge linkages between school staff and parents such that parents have access to institutional agents and resources to help them help their children navigate the pathway to college and are then able to share this information with extended family and other members of the community.

Study Context

Parental involvement in college planning and preparation was explored in the context of an ongoing collaborative project between the University of California, Los Angeles

(UCLA) and a partnership with a cluster of 24 local schools (2 high schools, 4 middle schools, and 18 elementary schools). The collaborative emerged from a concern that the numbers of students going to 4-year colleges from the district, and from this ethnically and racially diverse cluster in particular, had been declining steadily in the past decade.

One of the greatest challenges in improving schools, vis-à-vis college attendance, is the facilitation of meaningful parent involvement in college preparation, particularly in middle and high schools. Given the critical need to begin early in preparing students for college, we chose to focus on parents with children in middle school. Specifically, this project was designed to learn about parental needs in helping students prepare for college by actually engaging parents of middle school students in the college planning and preparation process through the development and delivery of a series of four evening workshops.

A preliminary version of the workshops was initially designed (and ultimately delivered) by two educators. It should be noted that although these educators shared many important qualities, including a commitment to increasing college access and a deep understanding of the college preparation process, they also came to the workshops with different backgrounds: One is a White high school teacher, the other a Latina higher education scholar, and as a result, they occasionally had differing perspectives on college preparation and access. Merging these perspectives into the final workshops offered a more comprehensive perspective on college access issues and allowed parents a connection to both worlds.

Given the demographics of the school populations, workshops were developed in both English and Spanish. The project was designed to be collaborative with families, and so, before they were finalized, the workshops were presented to two focus groups ($n = 11$) of local parents—one in English, one in Spanish—and refined based on that input. To facilitate this process and to ensure the most welcoming environment for Spanish-speaking parents, the project team included several members fluent in Spanish, and these individuals became the contact points for many participating Latino parents. For context, Table 1 presents demographic data for four middle schools that participated in the project.

Workshop Content

The four workshops were based on two important elements: (a) a series of presentations offering parents information on college-related topics and (b) in-depth research on Latino parents and their college knowledge needs that allowed us to identify additional roadblocks to their involvement in college planning and make appropriate adjustments to the Spanish-language version of the workshops. The workshops took place at a local, partner middle school over a 1-month period with a different workshop offered each week. At each workshop, notes and related handouts were provided. The topics addressed included the following:

Table 1. Demographic Description of School Sites (1999-2000 Academic Year)

	Middle School 1	Middle School 2	Middle School 3	Middle School 4
Total students	1017	1060	1522	1187
English-language learners	25%	28%	4%	31%
Students receiving reduced rate/free lunch	82%	74%	31%	77%
Ethnic breakdown				
Asian	3%	2%	3%	2%
African American	22%	19%	61%	36%
Latino	65%	71%	19%	57%
White	7%	7%	16%	4%
Other	3%	1%	1%	1%

- Night 1: An overview of the college choice process, an exploration of parent knowledge about college, and suggestions for parents on how to actively participate in their children’s college-planning process.
- Night 2: Knowing the system, or “system smarts.” Parents were given step-by-step instructions to help their children prepare for and apply to college.
- Night 3: Financial aid, specifically designed to relieve parental fears about being able to afford to send their children to college.
- Night 4: Review of the topics, a reemphasizing of strategies parents could use to support their children’s college plans. Parents were given a take-home “Family Action Plan” to complete.

The Spanish-language workshops addressed all the issues that were covered in the English-language groups. However, based on the focus groups and the expertise of the project team, additional topics were also covered. Specifically, an important concern that was addressed in the Spanish-language groups was the reservation that many Latino parents have about female children leaving home right after graduation. In this respect, discussions about what college life is really like (particularly in terms of safety) were especially important in the Spanish-language groups. Similarly, the preliminary focus group revealed that many parents see a financial need for children to work immediately after high school. As such, the discussion of the financial benefits of college was highly relevant to these parents, who were often struggling to understand how higher education could be justified when the family had immediate financial concerns.

Research Methodology

The challenge for those of us who work to improve the educational chances of under-represented students lies in understanding just what information is most useful and relevant to parents, in discovering the most appropriate ways to reach parents, and in

identifying the ways that parental involvement can become a consistent component of a school culture. With these issues in mind, this project was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What specific information is needed by parents of first-generation college-going middle school students as they prepare for their children to go to college?

Research Question 2: How can what is already known about parental involvement in the college planning process be tailored to the needs of an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse cluster of schools?

Research Question 3: What methods are successful for involving parents in the college planning and choice process? How can information be disseminated in such a way that parents feel welcome and informed?

Research Question 4: How can parental involvement in the college planning and choice process be sustained over time so that it becomes part of the culture of the school rather than dependent on isolated interventions?

The collaboration discussed in this article can be construed as an action research project in that the emphasis was on bringing about meaningful and lasting change in the schools while learning more about parent college informational needs and effective ways to provide this information to parents. From the university perspective, however, the work is more accurately described as scholarship of application (Boyer, 1990). Applied scholarship describes activities that are “tied directly to one’s special field of knowledge and relate to, and flow directly out of, this professional activity” (p. 22). In this sort of work, “theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other” (p. 23). That said, the parent workshops described here did include a structured data collection effort.

To answer the guiding research questions and determine the impact of the workshops, a variety of methodological approaches were employed, including planning focus group interviews, workshop evaluations, and follow-up interviews, all in either English or Spanish, depending on the participant’s preference. At the conclusion of each of the four workshops, parents completed short (one-page) evaluation forms asking them to assess each workshop component. Evaluation forms were also used to recruit parents for follow-up interviews, and interested parents provided their telephone numbers. All parents who agreed to follow-up interviews were contacted and asked about their needs in helping their children navigate pathways to college and about specific components of the workshops, including content, marketing, and delivery. Structured follow-up telephone interviews were conducted in Spanish with 14 Latino parents, during which detailed handwritten notes were taken. These notes were later translated and cross-checked by two members of the research team who are fluent in Spanish. Triangulation of these data resulted from using observational data from all four workshop sessions and by interviews with the workshop facilitators at the conclusion of the series. Findings presented in this article include data from both sets of

workshops because, although our emphasis in this article is on Latino families, many issues were common to both Spanish- and English-speaking parents.

Findings

All the parents in the Spanish-language groups were Latino, mostly from México. On average, 24 parents attended the workshops on each of the four nights. Parents who attended were not asked to provide any demographic information about themselves on the evaluation forms, but the telephone interviews conducted afterward do provide a glimpse into the educational levels and occupations of the workshop participants. Most of the parents who were interviewed from the Spanish-language groups were educated in México, to roughly the sixth-grade level. Many of these parents and their spouses held jobs in blue-collar industries (e.g., restaurant worker, housekeeper, truck driver). The Latina educator who delivered the Spanish-language workshops described parent attendees:

Whether we intended to or not, the parents that responded were predominantly immigrants. . . . Very caring, very loving, and very concerned about their children, but pretty much lost in terms of the system. . . . When you compare them to English-speaking parents who are interested in helping their children who may have the same profile, [nonimmigrant parents] have a little bit more of an edge in that at least they understand somewhat what the educational structure is. So the Latino parents are really disconnected because they don't understand the system at all.

With this context in mind, the research surrounding these workshops yielded findings that shed light on four important issues. First, we confirmed that the workshops were an effective means of communicating key college-related information to parents. Second, we learned a great deal about ways that the workshop content and delivery could be improved. Third, we furthered our knowledge about the particular needs and concerns of Latino parents as they prepare their children for college. And fourth, as a P-20 collaboration, we learned many things about effective practices and procedures in such a project and how this sort of work might be sustained over time. Each of these areas is described in greater detail in the paragraphs that follow.

Evaluation Forms

The evaluation forms distributed at the conclusion of each workshop were an important feedback mechanism for the project, and most parents who attended the workshops completed them. Table 2 shows the numbers of parents completing evaluation forms at the conclusion of each workshop.

Each version of this short form contained a series of questions designed to ascertain parents' opinions about the workshops. On a scale of 1 to 6 (where 6 is the highest

Table 2. Numbers of Latino Parents Returning Evaluation Forms and the Response Rates

	Night 1	Night 2	Night 3	Night 4	Total
Parents completing forms	20	20	12	19	71
Parents attending workshop	23	27	20	25	95
Response rate	87%	74%	60%	76%	75%

rating possible), parents consistently rated their satisfaction with the workshops above 5.3. Their opinions of the handouts and other information provided were just as high. At the conclusion of all four workshops, parents rated the entire workshop series an average 5.8 in terms of helpfulness. The evaluation forms addressed issues beyond general usefulness or helpfulness of the information provided; questions that addressed reasons for attending the workshops and ways in which parents heard about the workshops in the first place are addressed in later sections.

A total of 14 Latino parents volunteered to participate in follow-up telephone interviews. These telephone interviews yielded a wealth of data that shed light on all the research questions. Findings from open-ended responses on the evaluation forms and from follow-up interviews with parents are described. Data were coded into the following three themes: community-specific needs, parental information needs, and recommendations for workshop delivery.

Community-Specific Needs

We had anticipated two types of modifications to the workshops to make them relevant to this particular community: those that related to the local community itself (and would therefore be appropriate for both the English- and Spanish-language groups) and those that were particular to the Latino community. Those in the former category were minimal, and those in the latter category were somewhat more extensive.

The preliminary focus groups were our opportunity to hear from parents about the sort of information that would be particularly useful to their community. Not surprisingly, however, the need for information about college was so great that parents' informational requests were often already included in the content of the original workshops. In other words, these parents were in need of a basic informational foundation before most community-specific information would be relevant. The facilitators of the workshops were careful to highlight college-planning and -preparation resources available to parents at each of the four partner middle schools, describing ways that they could take advantage of these resources throughout the school year, thus creating positive social capital through the school and increasing opportunities for parents to continue to share resources related to college going within their extended families and community.

As already discussed, modifications made to the Spanish-language workshops went beyond strict translation; cultural concerns specific to the parents in the group (including conversations about campus safety and the financial benefits of a college

degree) were incorporated into the Spanish-language version. But several additional concerns arose during the workshops themselves. For example, a significant portion of the Spanish-language workshops was devoted to overcoming language barriers faced by nonnative English speakers as they navigate the universe of college-related information. Whenever possible during the workshops, parents were provided with resources in Spanish (with exceptions occurring only in the case of third-party documents that had not yet been translated) so that their fears of not being able to manage the college preparation and application process were allayed. For instance, during the discussion of financial aid, they were shown the FAFSA (free application for federal student aid) materials in Spanish and given an orientation to the Spanish Web site on the subject.

Oftentimes, language barriers can be compounded by limited literacy skills. As noted above, many parents who participated in these groups had the equivalent of a sixth-grade education. Discomfort with reading and writing—in English or in Spanish—had the potential to discourage parents from seeking assistance with their children’s educational futures. The facilitator remained aware of these issues throughout the workshop and provided full copies of the workshop slides. This allowed parents in the Spanish-speaking group to listen to the presentation without needing to read or write at the same time.

Finally, the facilitator addressed the issue of legal immigration status—a major concern among this group of immigrant parents. During the telephone interviews, one parent expressed the sentiments of many that attended the Spanish-language workshops, saying that the workshops “helped me in thinking that I have to make an effort in getting permanent residence for my children’s future. I learned how important it is to start saving even if I don’t have [residency] papers.” Another parent emphasized that there is always a need for even more information, saying, “I would like to have had some space to talk [in private] about my specific questions regarding the issue of illegal status and the possibilities of attending university.”

Another important concern that was addressed in the Spanish-language groups was the reservation that many Latino parents have about female children leaving home right after graduation. In this respect, discussions about what college life is really like (particularly in terms of safety) were especially important in the Spanish-language groups. Similarly, the preliminary focus group revealed that many parents see a financial need for children to work immediately after high school. As such, the discussion of the financial benefits of college was highly relevant to these parents, many of whom were struggling to understand how higher education could be justifiable when the family had immediate financial concerns.

Parents’ Informational Needs

In general, parents were satisfied with the amount of information and level of detail provided in the workshops. The facilitator allowed time for them to ask questions and raise concerns during the workshops themselves. Based on the evaluation forms, it is

clear that Latino parents came to the workshops with a variety of needs in terms of college-related information. Parents most frequently indicated needs for learning about (a) financial aid, (b) general information about the university and college system, (c) the process of applying for college, (d) academic requirements for college admission, and (e) tests required for college admission.

Not surprisingly, financial aid and other application-related topics were most frequently cited as important. This finding mirrors the research literature, which tells us that parents—especially those who have not themselves gone to college—are in great need of this sort of information (Zarate & Pachón, 2006). This finding was also echoed by the many questions parents had at the conclusion of the four workshops, most of which centered on paying for college and deciphering the complicated application process. Moreover, during the telephone interview phase we heard repeatedly that parents were pleased to have more detailed information about how to pay for college. One parent, for example, said, “My attitude has changed a lot. I learned more about . . . different grants and free money that I can look for on the computer. This was all new to me.” Another said, “Loans will not be as much of a headache as I thought. I still have this money problem in my head, but it’s not bothering me like it first did.” These sorts of comments are encouraging, because we know from research that perceived cost is one of the greatest barriers to first-generation students aspiring to attend 4-year colleges.

Latino parents also found the information about different types of colleges and universities helpful. For many, this was the first time they realized that there are so many options available for their children when they graduate from high school. As one parent put it:

It did open up the idea that there are so many colleges and universities—what, over 3,000?—and that there are a lot of things to consider besides money and that there is a specific option for each college. So I need to be more open [about where I send my daughter to college]. It’s not about getting into *this* college or *that* college; it’s about getting into the *right* college.

Knowledge of college options is important, because many parents who did not go to college have no basis for comparing the substantive difference between postsecondary institutions that look alike in that they all offer bachelor’s degrees but are qualitatively different institutions (Tornatzky, Lee, Mejía, & Tarant, 2003).

Parents indicated that a third important component of the workshops—information about the appropriate classes and standardized tests to take in high school—was quite useful as well. One parent said that she likes “to plan, but I did not have a clue what to expect.” The workshops helped her to formulate that plan. Another relayed the fact that she had already put this knowledge into action: “I was just talking to my son and my son said he wanted to take all [the required] classes as soon as he can.” In fact, many of the parents said they had taken their guided notes and “action plans” and put them into binders for easy reference, not only for their children who are nearing

college age but for their children who are still in elementary school as well. Some parents had shared the handouts and workshop information with friends and relatives, saying, "I'm giving copies of things [to other people] all the time."

Finally, offering the workshops to parents of middle school children was important because many parents indicated that they did not think they had to start helping their child plan for college so early. As one parent commented, "I thought I could wait until her senior year but I need to start now."

Workshop Development and Delivery

The most effective way to reach parents is directly, whether through telephone calls or mail delivered directly to the parent. The marketing plan for the workshops was designed accordingly, using the automated telephone system in the district and encouraging college coaches to distribute flyers to parents as they picked their children up from school. Interestingly, even though the flyer was printed in both English and Spanish, parents who attended the Spanish-language groups seemed to rely more on their children than on the printed information. Less often, parents heard about the workshops through school personnel or friends and relatives.

When asked the best way to be notified about events like this, one parent in the Spanish-language group said that the best way is "all possible ways." Many parents said they would prefer mail sent directly to the home or a telephone call. And, reinforcing the point that parents are more responsive to telephone calls from other parents, one workshop participant said she would prefer a call, "if it is someone I know." Another similarly noted that "people respond better to their own people."

This raises an important point about parent *networks*. Many parents rely on other parents to find out what is happening in their children's schools and in the community. In fact, when we recruited parents for the preliminary focus groups, one well-connected parent was able to put us in touch with more than a dozen other parents who were willing to attend. Even though parent networks were not a primary source of involvement for this particular set of workshops, many of the parents' comments indicate that it could be in the future, reinforcing the utility of linking the social capital, or social networks within families and communities, to the school as way to extend college knowledge.

There were specific aspects of the workshops that parents said made them feel especially welcome. Identifying these and creating an atmosphere of trust is integral, because it is an important part of determining whether parents return after their first workshop. First and foremost, parents in both groups indicated that they felt the workshop presenters were approachable and friendly. The presenter of the Spanish language workshops, a Latina, noted,

I think there's not a better vehicle to sell this whole thing than my own story, really. I mirror that community and those struggles, so I always like to share them. And I think that's the strongest thing I can contribute.

Similar to the importance of staying personally connected to the workshop participants, it was necessary for both presenters to stay attuned to the knowledge levels and individual contexts of the parents, as well. Because the parents who attended the workshops came from a variety of backgrounds and had a range of experiences, the question and answer opportunities were essential. One of the facilitators noted,

There is a certain amount of fluidity that must be incorporated to suit the needs of the group that you're addressing at the time. We have a core but you have to be sort of fluid. So, for example, (some) of the parents who showed up are parents of children in elementary school. We weren't reaching out to those people, but they showed up. So all of a sudden I had to start reminding myself when I talked about certain points to make sure and tailor towards this group, so that it was appropriate for them.

Sustaining Parental Involvement

It was important that this series of workshops not be an isolated event for these schools and these parents. This issue can be looked at from two perspectives: that of the schools and that of the parents. More precisely, from the schools' perspective, it is important to know how parents can continue to be involved with all types of school activities. From the parents' perspective, it is important to understand how the information that was shared in the workshops will continue to be used and how these parents can stay connected to their own children's educational pathways. Both of these are discussed in this section.

From the perspective of ongoing school/parent collaboration, counselors and school administrators were highly involved with the planning and delivery of the workshops from the earliest stages. Prior to the workshops, many parents who attended were not even aware that their children's middle schools had college counseling available. This information alone gives parents a resource that can enable them to obtain and make sense of college information beyond the conclusion of the workshops.

Another way that the workshops encouraged ongoing parental involvement in the schools was through parent empowerment. Although the focus of the workshops was college-related information, both the Spanish- and English-language versions contained discussions of the importance of parent involvement in education and strategies for parents as they interact with their children's schools. For many parents, just knowing that they have a right to request their children be put into college preparatory classes was empowering. Being provided with the language to make these requests ("My child is going to a 4-year college . . .") was even more so.

In addition to encouraging ongoing parental involvement with schools, the workshops were also an excellent vehicle for encouraging ongoing parental involvement with their children. Specifically, most of the parents told us during their telephone interviews that they had continued to use the materials from the workshops and had already begun taking their children on college and university campus visits. Some had

set up savings accounts or had already contacted their children's school counselors to discuss their children's college plans. One parent said the workshops "helped me to set my own goals. We parents need to stay motivated to motivate kids. This is my job and I should be doing it." Another parent said that she and her daughter both learned quite a bit and now, if they have a question about college planning, "we will sit down and look at our notes together."

Parents had numerous ideas for ways that their children's schools could help them to stay involved in their children's college-planning process. One asked for "constant reminders of what it takes" to get to college whereas another wished for "progress reports" and study tips for her daughter. One parent felt that the schools "should do the work seeing that the [college] requirements are met . . . it should be an automatic process." Many of the parents thought that additional and ongoing workshops like those offered in this project would be helpful. Indeed, there was great interest in having the schools hold follow-up workshops either later in the year or in the following academic year. What is most important about all the ideas that were offered is that the parents recognize the school as a potential resource and see themselves as capable of requesting additional support, which is a necessary step toward sustained parental involvement.

Conclusions and Implications

The series of parent workshops offered through this collaborative project was successful in encouraging early parental involvement in the process of college preparation. The workshop presenters prioritized addressing the concerns of a diverse group of parents. Parents found the information useful, felt welcomed and comfortable, and indicated that they would use what they had learned in the future, both to stay involved in their children's schools and to remain active partners with their children as they prepare for and aspire to college. Nevertheless, although the model used for this project was highly successful, there are many lessons to be learned from our experiences. This section addresses those lessons.

Community-Specific Needs

Though research reveals that schools need to bring parents into the educational experience of their children, these opportunities to partner do not always exist, particularly for Latino families. One important reason is the barrier often created by language difficulties. Parents whose first language is not English may see this language barrier as their own failing, and in cases where the school makes no effort to bridge this gap, the problem is exacerbated (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; McClelland & Chen, 1997). In a similar way, this and other instances of cultural disconnect may, in some cases, lead parents to participate less in family involvement programs because they do not feel comfortable or welcomed in schools. These concerns must be attended to in programs like the one described here. This series of workshops offered the following lessons in

this respect that, when followed, will facilitate the creation of positive social capital between schools and Latino parents:

- Parental involvement programs are more effective when there is a personal and cultural connection between the school and the parent, putting parents at ease and creating a more comfortable environment. In the case of these workshops, the Spanish workshop facilitator's ability to speak of her own experiences as a Latina college student helped the parents in her group visualize their own daughters and sons accomplishing the same thing.
- Through preliminary research, we were able to identify particular concerns among Latino parents. This attention to cultural differences made the workshops especially useful to this community. Future versions of the workshops should attend to the particular needs of other underrepresented groups such as African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American parents.

Parents' Informational Needs

Parents' needs and hunger for college-related information are seemingly endless. They are important partners in their children's educational journeys, but they must be informed partners if their children are to succeed. Workshops such as these can be a useful source of information, but the information must be offered with attention to particular details. More precisely, the following issues must be addressed.

- Parents bring a range of concerns and experiences to the table. In any parent involvement activity, they must be provided with a forum for sharing concerns, questions, and ideas, so that this range of needs can be met.
- The need for college-related information is so great that almost all topics become relevant. For a project that seeks to be directly relevant to an individual community, the focus should be on highlighting what resources are available once the workshops have concluded. For example, many of the parents who attended these workshops were not aware of college preparation and planning resources that were available at the schools or that they could make appointments with school counselors to discuss college plans. Furthermore, families learned about the importance of helping their children prepare for college as early as middle school.

Effective Workshop Marketing and Delivery

Ultimately, the key element of a successful parent/school program is that parents feel "wanted" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 28). If children approve of their parents' involvement and the school's climate is inviting, with teachers and counselors welcoming and facilitating parental involvement, parents are much more likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Given this, a welcoming environment

is absolutely essential to any parent involvement program. The following lessons, then, should be learned from this series of workshops:

- To the extent possible, schools must create and sustain personal connections to parents. Whether during specific events or in day-to-day interactions, school representatives must be open to and available for questions and appear approachable (through demeanor, for example).
- Parent meetings and workshops are best marketed through a multipronged approach, including providing all information in Spanish. Parents rely on different sources of information to find out what is happening at their children's schools, and the more avenues through which they have the opportunity to hear about upcoming events, the better. In particular, parent networks are useful because they allow parents to hear about events from trusted sources.

Sustaining Parental Involvement

Although parents of students from underrepresented groups are often not presented with opportunities that allow them to get involved in their children's education (Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996; Yonezawa, Hirshberg, & Williams, 1995; Zarate, 2007), this must change if these students are to be successful in preparing for and aspiring to college. A series of workshops such as the one described in this article can be a seed for sustained parental involvement but only if other important factors are taken into account. More specifically:

- Collaborative projects that involve school personnel, parents, and university scholars have numerous benefits. For example, the collaboration allows for multiple perspectives to be included in the information provided. Additionally, this sort of collaboration increases the sustainability of the work because the knowledge resides with individuals who can work directly with parents after the project has ended.
- A series of workshops such as this cannot be an isolated event. The need for information among parents is so great that there are numerous opportunities for ongoing communication. Moreover, parents who take part in these sort of workshops become empowered and inevitably hungry for more information. If this enthusiasm is left alone, it runs the risk of disappearing. If it is attended to, it has the potential to grow into something much greater.
- Parent meetings and workshops at school sites are valuable because they offer a way for parents to connect with their children's schools and meet school personnel. At the same time, however, parents need to continue the process on their own. Visits to college campuses, for example, can lead them to feel comfortable about bringing their children to visit and, ultimately, to allow them attend 4-year schools.

Closing Thoughts

Issues of access and educational inequality have long overwhelmed the postsecondary trajectories of Latino, African American, and Native American students (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Advocacy groups, individuals, K-12 educational systems, and colleges search for different solutions to improving the access of underrepresented and low-income students. From available evidence we know that parents have an enormous impact on students' college aspirations and on their choices of attending 4-year and more selective, elite colleges. Yet current practices tend to be ill suited to the development of meaningful ways to include families as an influence on students' educational aspirations and choices. They remain an untapped resource, with incredible potential for increasing the educational chances of historically underrepresented students.

It is clear that there must be changes at the school level that encourage and allow more Latino students to aspire to and prepare for college. The college mission must be a priority, receiving attention not only from students, teachers, counselors, and administrators but from parents as well. In short, the cultures of our schools must be transformed to include families as active partners in the college preparation process. Universities can and should play an active role in such a transformation through collaborative work with schools. If we are to maintain the diverse student bodies that make universities rich and productive spaces for learning, it is imperative that we undertake projects that tap every potential resource in the advancement of student achievement.

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