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“Why Not Me?” College Enrollment and Persistence of High-Achieving First-Generation Latino College Students

Desireé Vega

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the college-going experiences of 10 high-achieving first-generation Latino college juniors and seniors at a Hispanic-Serving Institution in the southwest. Despite facing barriers, many first-generation Latino students succeed in attending and completing their postsecondary education. Yet, minimal research exists to document these students’ success stories. This study explored participants’ perceptions of their decisions to attend college and motivation to persist in college. Results revealed four main themes: academic rigor, support networks, internal motivation, and responsibility as a first-generation college student. Recommendations for school psychologists working at the secondary level are provided to address inequities in postsecondary attendance among first-generation Latino students.

Latinos represent the largest minority group in the United States and are projected to comprise approximately 29% of the population by the year 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Yet, they continue to perform significantly lower than other racial and ethnic groups in the area of academics (Becerra, 2012; Gándara, 2010). Among Latinos ages 25–29 only 15% have a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 22% of African Americans, 41% of Whites, and 63% of Asians (Pew Research Center, 2016). Low educational attainment often results in unemployment, low wages and earnings, and increased poverty rates, which can have an impact on the ability of Latinos to contribute to the economy and the global competitiveness of the United States (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Latinos also represent a significant proportion of the unskilled labor force and, accordingly, they are underrepresented in the highest paying careers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

Latino students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and be first-generation college students (Engle, 2006). The intersection of these identities compounds the difficulties faced when attempting to advance one’s education. First-generation status often has a negative impact on college attendance and persistence (Hudley et al., 2009). First-generation college students tend to have lower grade-point averages (GPA), enroll in advanced courses at a lower rate, and perform lower on standardized tests when compared to non-first-generation college students (Atherton, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Current research on first-generation college students—defined as students who are the first in their family to obtain a bachelor’s degree (Boden, 2011)—does not comprehensively attend to the unique experiences of Latino students. More specifically, existing research has not examined the educational process in terms of how first-generation Latino college students make the decision to attend college and what factors contribute to their successful enrollment and persistence (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Reyes & Nora, 2012).

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Limited access to college enrollment and completion represents a social injustice. Thus, the goal of increasing Latino college access and graduation should be a national priority (Excelencia in Education, 2015). Researchers (i.e., Shriberg, 2009; Shriberg et al., 2008) have called for the field of school psychology to enact a social justice agenda to combat the disparities (e.g., disproportionate placement in special education, disproportionate disciplinary consequences, high levels of grade retention and dropout rates, and involvement in the criminal justice system) experienced by racially and ethnically diverse students. School psychologists play a critical role in supporting student achievement through various activities including assessment, consultation, counseling, prevention and intervention, and advocacy (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2010). Further, school psychologists' knowledge, skills, and practices "reflect understanding and respect for human diversity and promote effective services, advocacy, and social justice for all children, families, and schools" (NASP, 2010, p. 4). School psychologists must implement a proactive and preventative approach to social justice that attends to the ecological and systemic factors that have an impact on educational success (Speight & Vera, 2009). As school psychologists continue to move toward expanding their role beyond assessment-related activities (Fagan & Wise, 2007), involvement in college and career readiness activities serves as an opportunity to effectively meet the needs of first-generation Latino students and further social justice through access to college for this student population.

FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In high school, first-generation students report limited access to enrollment in rigorous courses and discouragement from enrolling in these courses by school staff (Klopfenstein, 2004; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). Hudley et al. (2009) examined college freshmen's perceptions of support in high school and found that support from high school teachers and counselors were strongly related to social and academic adjustment in college for first-generation and non-first-generation students. Additionally, the rigor of students' high school curriculum has been found to be strongly associated with overall performance in college (Garza, Bain, & Kupczynski, 2014). Therefore, school support and access to advanced classes can prepare students to successfully enroll in college (Hill, 2008).

Upon enrollment in college, first-generation college students are likely to leave within the first four semesters (Ishitani, 2003). These students also tend to work fulltime and attend college parttime. Consequently, they are less academically and socially integrated into the college community (Kuh, 2008). With this in mind, it is necessary to focus not only on college enrollment, but also on retention and persistence through degree completion (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Stebleton and Soria (2014) investigated perceptions of academic obstacles and found that compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation college students more frequently encountered challenges that were potentially detrimental to their academic success. More specifically, the first-generation college students in the study experienced competing work and family responsibilities, poor study skills, feelings of depression and sadness, and weak English and mathematics skills.

LATINO FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Latino students are enrolling in college at higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups, but continue to lag behind other groups in bachelor's degree attainment rates (Pew Research Center, 2016). Thus, many Latinos are enrolling in college, but they are not persisting through degree completion. One reason for low graduation rates is that many Latino college students are also first-generation college students (Nuñez, Sparks, & Hernandez, 2011) and lack the social capital necessary for college success (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Additionally, the intersectionality of being from low socioeconomic backgrounds may place financial barriers and limitations on these students' success and persistence in college (Engle, 2006; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

For Latino college students, a cultural factor related to enrollment and persistence challenges is familial obligations. The Latino culture is collectivistic and identifies with the core value of *familismo*, where group needs are prioritized over individual needs (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Accordingly, Latino college students may face pressure from their family to live at home and/or work to assist the family, which can potentially lead to a decline in academic performance (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, and Burgos-Cienfuegos (2015) explored home–school value conflict among 14 first-generation Latino college students and found that those who prioritized school over family demands, such as studying for an exam instead of attending a family function, experienced personal inner conflict. Upon making a decision to focus on school demands, the participants continued to assess whether they made the correct decision. At times, they experienced guilt as well as difficulty concentrating in class or while trying to study. Regardless of the decision participants made, they felt conflicted because if they attended family functions and compromised studying, their grades could suffer, and if they prioritized school demands over family, they experienced guilt and stress.

Gloria and Castellanos (2012) examined college educational and coping responses among first-generation Latina students. Similar to the participants in the Vasquez et al. (2015) study, Gloria and Castellanos (2012) found that first-generation Latina students experienced conflict with their families based on their decision to leave home for college. The participants felt this conflict was an expression of parents' fear of losing them rather than their parents not wanting them to obtain a college education. The participants explained to their families that attending college would better their own future and the future of their family. They also invited their families to cultural events at the university to help ease their fears, which helped their parents feel more involved in their daughter's lives.

Ceballo (2004) investigated the role of parents in the academic success of 10 first-generation Latino college students. In contrast to other findings, the parents demonstrated an unconditional commitment to their children's education. Moreover, several parents experienced regret about not completing their own education and made education a priority for their children. The parents, all born outside of the United States and from impoverished backgrounds, saw education as a vehicle to escape poverty. These studies illustrate that for many first-generation Latino college students family support and/or conflict may be related to factors such as generational status (i.e., U.S. born versus foreign born), parents' college knowledge, gender expectations, and students' perception of familial expectations.

Few studies have explicitly examined the success stories of first-generation Latino college students. Borrero (2011) studied how college-bound first-generation Latino high school seniors overcame challenges to successfully enroll in college. He found that, at times, the participants experienced academic struggles, low self-efficacy, and low motivation. However, they viewed college as the next step in their lives. Support from family, teachers, and the community also helped these students feel prepared to attend college.

Boden (2011) explored perceived academic readiness of first-generation Latino college students and found contrary to extant research on first-generation students that her participants felt prepared for college. The participants developed a plan for their future that would make them competitive for college, including enrolling in advanced courses in high school and participating in extracurricular activities. Additionally, the majority of the participants began thinking about attending college early in their academic careers, some as early as elementary school. This appeared to help the participants facilitate readiness and planning for college. Further, the participants reported receiving guidance from school counselors and parents to help develop this plan. The participants also held strong self-efficacy skills about their ability to attend and persist in college through determination and hard work.

The aforementioned studies have explored and identified support factors contributing to the success of first-generation Latino college-bound and college students. However, minimal research has examined the factors influencing college enrollment and persistence among a specific subset of students such as high-achieving first-generation Latino college students. There is a need to understand the educational experiences that contribute to the decision to attend college and the reasons these students persist in

college. Moreover, because first-generation students are likely to drop out of college within their first 2 years (Ishitani, 2003), it is important to consider students who have persisted in college beyond this timeframe. The current study addresses this gap in the research. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the college enrollment and persistence of 10 high-achieving first-generation Latino college juniors and seniors. The study addressed the following research questions:

- What factors influenced high-achieving first-generation Latino college students' postsecondary enrollment?
- What factors influenced high-achieving first-generation Latino college students' postsecondary persistence?

Based on findings, recommendations for school psychologists who practice at the secondary level are provided to help them address inequities in postsecondary attendance among first-generation Latino students, while simultaneously promoting social justice via college and career readiness activities.

METHODOLOGY

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was deemed most appropriate for this study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA is concerned with exploring how people understand major events in their lives. Moreover, it involves an examination of participants' interpretations of a particular phenomenon in order to make meaning out of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA was employed to better understand how the participants' perceived their decisions to enroll in and persevere in their pursuit of a college education.

Participants

A purposeful sample (Smith et al., 2009) of 10 first-generation Latino college juniors and seniors attending a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the southwest was selected for this study. At this institution, Hispanic students represented 32% of the student body and 41% of first-time freshmen identified as first-generation college students (Student Body, n.d.). This university was selected for the current study due to its large presence of Latino and first-generation students as well as its HSI designation, which allocated specific supports for Latino students.

To recruit participants for the study, the researcher for the current study, who is also the author of this study, obtained participant contact information through the Office of Institutional Research for students that met the following criteria: junior or senior status, identified as Hispanic/Latino, cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher, and first-generation status (first in the family to obtain a bachelor's degree). An e-mail was sent to the list of students and detailed the purpose of the study and provided students with information to contact the researcher if they were interested in participation. Students who contacted the researcher and set up an appointment for an interview were included in the study. Participants signed a consent form and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time during the data-collection process without consequence.

The sample consisted of 10 participants: eight females and two males. The age range of the sample was 20–39 years old (mean = 25.6 years old). Five participants were in their junior year and five were in their senior year. Participants' cumulative GPA ranged from 3.5 to 4.0 (mean = 3.788). Additionally, eight participants transferred from community college and/or another university to the current institution. See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Data Collection

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire to provide information such as pseudonym, age, gender, place of birth, parents' place of birth, home language(s), first-generation status, year in school,

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	GPA	Year	Major	Attendance at Previous Institution
Alex	39	Male	3.75	Senior	Applied Arts and Science	Community college
Alicia	20	Female	3.8	Junior	Early Childhood Education	4-year institution
Edward	32	Male	3.7	Senior	English	Community college
Isabel	24	Female	3.95	Senior	Pre-Physical Therapy	4-year institution and community college
Jasmine	24	Female	3.5	Junior	Psychology	4-year institution and community college
Jennifer	25	Female	4.0	Junior	Dietetics	Community college
Karla	21	Female	4.0	Senior	Mathematics Education	No
Lauren	20	Female	3.5	Junior	Microbiology	No
Louise	25	Female	4.0	Junior	Criminal Justice	Community college
Valerie	26	Female	3.68	Junior	Pre-Healthcare Administration	Community college

GPA, and attendance at another university. The use of individual, face-to-face, semistructured interviews allowed participants to share detailed information related to their identity, high school experience, and college experience. In-depth interviews allowed participants to share their perspectives about a specific phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009) and the semistructured approach permitted the researcher, who conducted all of the interviews, and participants to discuss the interview questions and follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Smith et al., 2009). Sample questions included: "How has your identity as a first-generation Latino student shaped your life?" "When did you start to think about going to college?" "What motivates you to complete college?" The interviews were between 1 and 2.5 hours long. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by two graduate research assistants. Participants received a \$10 gift card to a local grocery store following completion of their interview.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data focused on examining the interview transcripts and identifying significant statements that provided an understanding of how the participants made sense of their college enrollment and persistence decisions (Smith et al., 2009). More specifically, the first step of the IPA analysis involved reading and rereading the interview transcripts as a way to become immersed in the data (Smith et al., 2009). Following this process, the researcher made notes on the transcripts and highlighted statements made by the participants that captured key concepts relevant to their decisions to attend and persist in college. For example, during the interviews the participants discussed why they wanted to attend college. The researcher highlighted statements relevant to this discussion and made notes to understand how the participants explained these factors.

Next, the focus was on identifying emergent themes, which involved examining the notes and highlighted statements made in the previous step (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher reviewed the notes to identify and synthesize what was important and representative of the participants' experiences. The emergent themes were compiled into a document, and the notes that supported the themes were categorized

accordingly. After the emergent themes were identified, the researcher identified connections across the themes, similarities, and differences in how participants interpreted the phenomenon. In examining college enrollment decisions, the researcher listed each participant's reason(s) for enrolling in college with supporting quotes from his or her transcripts and provided each factor with a label (e.g., family support, school support, internal motivation). This analytical process was conducted for each transcript, and themes that were experienced by a majority of the participants were maintained as major themes for the study (Smith et al., 2009).

Researcher Positionality

Owing to the qualitative nature of the study, the researcher acknowledged her positionality in relation to the research study. The researcher was associated with the university where the participants attended school. However, no prior relationship with the participants existed. As a result of the connection to the university, the researcher was knowledgeable of the supports available on campus for all students, first-generation students, and Latino students. Additionally, the researcher was a first-generation college student and identifies as Latina. These identities likely provided the researcher with insider status (Kanuha, 2000) by allowing the researcher to build rapport and trust more easily with the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

The researchers' level of familiarity with this research topic as well as her identities (i.e., first-generation, Latina) have the potential to introduce biases into the study related to assumptions about how the participants successfully navigated their college experiences. However, specific methods were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant selection was purposeful, criterion-based (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and voluntary. The interview questions were developed based on a review of relevant literature and in collaboration with a first-generation Latina graduate student (Smith et al., 2009). The interview questions were then piloted with a first-generation Latino graduate student to determine their appropriateness for the study and the questions were revised accordingly (Creswell, 2013). Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) involved sharing interview transcripts with the participants by e-mail to ensure they were portrayed accurately. Further, the researcher provided the participants with the opportunity to discuss and review interview transcripts to ensure clarity and accuracy. Triangulation of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also conducted as the participants completed a demographic questionnaire, which was compared with information collected from the Office of Institutional Research. Finally, peer debriefing was utilized with a colleague as a means to discuss the researchers' interpretation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

Four main themes emerged from data analysis to explain the factors that influenced the participants' postsecondary enrollment and persistence: (a) academic rigor, (b) support networks, (c) internal motivation, and (d) responsibility as a first-generation college student. Interview excerpts are used to illustrate the themes in the following section.

Academic Rigor

Seven of the 10 participants in the study reported completing advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement, dual credit, specialized courses) as high school students. Alicia reported, "When I was in high school, I took dual credit, and I was actually one class short, 3 hours short of graduating high school as a college sophomore." Isabel shared, "I actually got accepted into a magnet school that focused on health science." In the magnet school, she enrolled in specialized courses and worked alongside health professionals such as nurses. Karla discussed her experience of initially not enrolling in advanced courses but not settling for remaining in less challenging courses. She indicated:

I actually started in regular classes [in middle school] and I was bored.... My mom talked to the counselor and she was like, “Yeah we’ll put you in pre-AP.” ... A lot of us went to the local community college to get dual credits.

Support Networks

The three support networks discussed are school personnel, family, and friends.

School Personnel

Participants reported positive experiences with school personnel while in high school. Jennifer shared, “I loved my teachers in high school. They were all very encouraging. I felt I got a good education.... I felt they all cared about us learning.” Valerie also related:

I had a couple of teachers who probably really changed my life. I always thought I’d become president. He [the teacher] always told me he’d vote for me, convinced the class in seventh grade to vote for me if I ever ran. I had great teachers.

Lauren discussed how her school counselors worked closely with students and emphasized college enrollment early on in high school. She reported: “We had a lot of counselors come constantly to our English classrooms to tell us about college applications since freshman and sophomore year telling us what we can do.” Similarly, Karla discussed how her high school promoted applying to college for all students. She shared:

I think the school did try to encourage everybody because they did make everybody turn in a senior portfolio at the end of the year.... You had to make a résumé; you had to get one recommendation letter. I think they made the majority of us do the Apply Texas [a Texas college application site], or what is that called My Apply Texas or something.

Family

Family members played an important role in the participants’ motivation to enroll in college. For some of the participants, their parents instilled in them the necessity of attending college while other participants had siblings attend college, which helped them believe it was also possible for them to enroll in college. Valerie indicated, “My dad’s side of the family probably started grooming me for college the day I could speak and understand them. College was all I think I talked about from seventh grade to graduation.” Alicia shared her mother’s influence on her drive to attend college. She explained:

I always knew I was going to college from the get-go. My mom always told us that “Either you go into college or you’re going into the military. You’re not going to settle. I’m not going to let you settle for something past high school.” So throughout school I’ve always been pretty good. Good grades and everything, and I was college bound.

Jennifer and Karla both had older sisters who attended college, which gave them confidence to also pursue a college education. Jennifer stated:

I have an older sister. She graduated from college a few years ago. And so having her have done it first, it’s been motivation for me. And it kinda set the bar for like, not so much for what my parents expected, but just kinda what I felt was the right thing to do.

Karla said, “I think a big thing for me was when my sister was able to go. I saw that she could do it so I was like maybe I can do it too.”

Family also inspired the participants' aspirations to persist in college. They discussed how hard they witnessed their parents' work for them to have a better future. Lauren discussed her parents' struggles as a motivator to succeed in college: "I see all their struggles, especially my mom, the challenges with being in this country, because they both, they had to learn a language here. I saw them going through very, very rough times." Isabel also shared:

I can't see myself not going to school and finishing. Especially just how I said earlier that you know all the hard work my parents did to, first of all, get us here. You know, give us the resources that we need. I feel like I kinda owe them.

Similarly, Valerie recounted:

How much my mom had to struggle and work.... She did so much for us and always supported us. I was never aware that we were poor or that we, you know, if she struggled to put food on the table I definitely wasn't aware of that. But I also know that she worked really hard. I hate to say but I don't want the same life as her. I think not having her life and constantly being badgered by my family to do well definitely helps.

Friends

Alex's background was unique compared to the other participants. He grew up in Mexico and came to the United States when he was 21 years old. He took English as a second language classes at a community college, and eventually obtained his General Equivalency Diploma. He found a network to help him learn about the college application process: "I was lucky to be around a couple of other good students who helped me because one of them told me that they would help me do my application right there." Edward worked for a few years after high school graduation and had a coworker who was a college student encourage him to enroll in college. He reflected on his friendship with his coworker:

I guess he saw something in me. Maybe he saw a guy who was making some decent money, but creatively there were some of a void there so he started telling me about college. I'll never forget when I called him, and I was like, "Look man, I want to go to college. I'm going to stop by the counselor, sit down, and see what I've gotta do; fill out an application or whatever. But I'm kind of scared to go. Would you go with me?"

Internal Motivation

The participants discussed the importance of college success and persistence as a personal motivator. They also made the connection between a college degree and an improved quality of life. Edward bluntly stated, "Why not me?" and "Dropping out would be just a waste." He also shared, "I don't want to limit myself. I want to give myself as many opportunities as I can to better my life and stay in school. Graduating and keeping on track is the way to do that." Jennifer indicated that she has always been "self-motivated" and graduating from college "would be a big sense of accomplishment" to say, "I graduated with a major in nutrition." Alex discussed the importance of college: "I don't know but I need to go to school. Finish something. And that has been always in my mind since I was I don't know since I could remember 5 or 6 years old."

Karla also had the internal ambition to complete college. She shared: "I want to graduate. I feel like I just have goals. I just set goals for myself like graduating in 4 years. I want to do that. I want to graduate summa cum laude." Moreover, Louise felt confident in her ability to achieve success in college. She reported: "I do have that expectation for myself and I don't expect anything less. If I ever have doubts, which I have plenty of, I still push myself regardless." Valerie also stated, "I feel like if I can work a little bit more for a better quality of life then might as well put in the work."

Responsibility as a First-Generation College Student

As first-generation college students the participants felt a responsibility toward their family to complete college and the need to be a role model for their families. Edward mentioned, “Being a first-generation, it’s scary but, yeah, it’s empowering. I’m sort of doing something that the odds were against.” He also shared the impact his achievements could have on his family members. He mentioned:

My nieces, you know, they see me and I’m telling them, “You got to go to school. Even if it means going to a junior college like I did. But, you have to as women. You need to get educated. You need to be smart.” And I told my niece, “There doesn’t have to be limitations for you. You can go out and do something.”

Alicia explained the pressure she experienced as a first-generation college student. She stated:

I feel like it’s a really huge responsibility. I have a lot riding on me.... Growing up I had cousins who all went the wrong path. They ran into the law and stuff like that. I knew I never wanted to do that. I knew I wanted to be here.

Similarly, Lauren had a family member who did not complete college and it placed pressure on her to be the first to graduate from college:

I remember I had an older cousin who went to college and he was going to be the first one. I remember my dad got off the phone and he said my cousin got some girl pregnant so he dropped out.

Because of her cousin’s situation, her dad told her, “See, like I told you, no boyfriends. It’s up to you now, you’re going to be the first one.” Valerie also experienced internalized demands from her family to complete college:

I think if I fail no one would talk to me. I know that’s very dramatic but you know my mom whenever she talks about education she starts crying because I think...just to her it equals opportunities that she would never experience and hasn’t experienced.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study sought to understand the college enrollment and persistence experiences of 10 high-achieving first-generation Latino college juniors and seniors. This unique sample was selected as the intersection of ethnic identity and socioeconomic status tends to further disadvantage this population from attending and completing college (Saenz et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the participants represented a subset of academically successful students who completed the first few years of their college education. Moreover, since the study’s completion, 8 of the 10 participants have graduated with their bachelor’s degree, and 6 of the 8 graduated with honors: two summa cum laude (GPA 3.8–4.0) and four magna cum laude (GPA 3.6–3.79). The majority of the sample enrolled in advanced courses in high school, which is contrary to existing research on access to and enrollment in advanced courses among racially and ethnically diverse students (Klopfenstein, 2004; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, the majority of the participants felt prepared for the workload in college, which may be attributed to participation in these advanced courses and previous enrollment in community college or a 4-year institution (Boden, 2011).

The participants discussed the influence of their support systems on their college-going ambitions. School personnel provided encouragement, nurtured a love for learning, and took steps to ensure completion of college applications while friends provided hands-on assistance to complete college applications. Borrero (2011) and Boden (2011) previously documented the role of supportive school personnel. However, the participants in those studies received not only encouragement but also explicit guidance in applying for college, which was not widely reported in the current study. Further, the participants in the current study had friends with social capital (Coleman, 1988) related to applying to college. This network equipped them with support in navigating the college-going process though it was limited to the institution in which the friends were already enrolled. The role of friends has not been examined in the research concerning first-generation Latino students' college enrollment. This is an area that warrants future investigation since it was to the participants' benefit to have friends who used their college knowledge to help them apply to college.

Participants reported increased self-efficacy beliefs after witnessing their siblings go to college. Brenes (2012) examined the risk and protective factors that influenced academic success and college enrollment among Latino students and found that having siblings who attended college served as a motivator for the participants to do well in school. Moreover, Ceja (2006) explored the role of siblings in providing college information to Chicana students. Similar to the participants in the current study, attending college allowed the younger siblings to visualize college as an attainable goal and set a college-going expectation. Additionally, participants felt motivated to attend and complete college due to their parents' hardships, which is consistent with findings by Ceballo (2004), Borrero (2011), and Boden (2011). Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012) also studied the factors associated with high educational attainment among first-generation Mexican-descent college students. Similarly, participants acknowledged their parents' struggles and sacrifices as motivation for their success. This may be a cultural factor unique to racial and ethnic minority first-generation college students, particularly among Latinos as family often represents a strong part of their identity (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Therefore, their success may also represent their families' success and degree completion serves as a source of pride for the entire family.

This study's participants felt internally driven to be successful in college and believed it could provide access to increased opportunities. Boden's (2011) participants also reported high self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to attend and persist in college. Extant research on first-generation Latino college students' self-determination and achievement remains limited (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Nonetheless, the current study's participants held high expectations for themselves and trusted that graduating from college would allow them to have a better quality of life in the future. Another finding that is not prevalent in the research is the reported responsibility participants felt as a result of being a first-generation college student. The responsibility was related to making their families proud by serving as role models who demonstrated that college was possible for other family members. At the same time such responsibility placed pressure on participants to succeed and be the first to graduate from college. Gloria and Castellanos (2012) also emphasized how maintaining family connections can be both an advantage and a stressor because although the participants in the current study sought to make their parents proud and were motivated by their struggles, they also experienced pressure to succeed. The participants did not describe this pressure as detrimental to their success. Nonetheless, future research is needed to determine the impact it may have on college persistence (Vasquez et al., 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

School psychologists have not traditionally been identified as professionals involved in college and career readiness activities (Astramovich & Loe, 2006). Nonetheless, because school counselors often have high caseloads and limited time to provide college counseling (College Board, 2012), the role of the school psychologist in secondary settings should be reexamined. As their training and skills often overlap, school psychologists and school counselors should consider collaborating to meet students' needs (Harris, Mayes, Vega, & Hines, 2016). While the traditional role of the school psychologist entails

assessment for special education eligibility, the field is shifting to take more proactive and preventative approaches in service delivery (i.e., counseling, intervention, staff development; Fagan & Wise, 2007). Therefore, engagement in college and career readiness activities is an optimal opportunity for school psychologists to work with first-generation Latino students.

To advocate for the needs of these students, school psychologists and school counselors must ensure administration is utilizing their professional skills in ways that benefit students. If administrators lack an understanding of the role of school psychologists beyond engagement in assessment-related activities and school counselors beyond conducting guidance and administrative duties (i.e. scheduling), then these professionals may have minimal opportunity to implement the wide range of skills they possess. Advocacy for others is an important component of social justice (Shriberg et al., 2008). Therefore, an awareness and knowledge of the ecological and systemic barriers that affect college attendance and persistence for first-generation Latino students is necessary. School psychologists and school counselors should meet with their school administrators (Speight & Vera, 2009) to discuss the ways in which they can help first-generation Latino students become college and career ready. This approach should involve reviewing data at their schools concerning college-going rates, college admissions exam completion rates, and enrollment in advanced courses among first-generation Latinos.

If gaps in college enrollment rates, college admissions exam completion rates, and enrollment in advanced courses are identified after reviewing these data, action must be taken to enable college and career readiness among first-generation Latino students. School psychologists and school counselors can build a college-going culture by promoting college awareness and the feasibility of college enrollment and persistence (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy, 2010). This can be achieved by identifying first-generation Latino students early in their high school careers (i.e., freshman year) and developing groups that meet regularly (i.e., biweekly or monthly) to discuss college-related activities such as career exploration, types of colleges, degree types, applying to college, selecting a major, and applying for financial aid and scholarships. Additionally, they can advise students in these groups to select rigorous courses (i.e., AP, dual credit) that will prepare them for college. School psychologists and school counselors should also discuss college entrance exams including when to take the exams, preparation and study skills, and exam fees (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy, 2010). These actions can help students develop an understanding of the college-going process by breaking down all the steps to preparation, attendance, and persistence. By promoting this college awareness, students' self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to attend and be successful in college may increase.

Collaboration with families is an important component of college and career readiness (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy, 2010) and social justice advocacy. An understanding of the perspectives on education is a critical consideration when working with Latino families, while also keeping in mind that cultural variations do exist. When school psychologists develop rapport and an ongoing relationship with Latino families concerns can be discussed. Parents may have concerns related to their children leaving their homes, paying for college, the need to attend college fulltime, and the admissions process. School psychologists can provide them with information to address these concerns by scheduling informational events or workshops and meeting with families on an individual and ongoing basis.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because this study was exploratory in nature and minimal research has sufficiently examined the experiences of first-generation Latino college students, this study's findings set the stage for further research. Eight of the 10 participants previously attended another institution of higher education. Therefore, examination of first-generation Latino college students who have and have not transferred institutions and emerged as high-achieving is warranted to better understand the potential effects of previous college attendance on achievement. Additionally, a longitudinal study would be beneficial in exploring the college experiences of first-generation Latino students from a developmental perspective.

Although the role of attending an HSI did not emerge as a theme in the study, institution type can potentially influence the success of first-generation Latino students and should be looked at more closely (Laden, 2004). Methodological limitations were also present and future studies should utilize a research team to increase the validity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews with university personnel and families to better understand their role in college persistence may also be beneficial to further triangulate findings.

CONCLUSION

The question “Why not me?” when it comes to postsecondary enrollment and persistence is critical to consider for first-generation Latino students. Being first generation and Latino clearly does not equate to failure as evidenced by the participants in this study. Yet, these identities often determine access to a higher education. It is important to consider the role of school psychologists in social justice advocacy and engagement in college and career readiness activities for increased access to a much-deserved college education among first-generation Latino students. Nonetheless, school psychologists cannot resolve this problem on their own. Therefore, a commitment and investment in the future of these students is necessary from the top down if we are to truly see measurable increases in postsecondary degree attainment and the realization of social justice for first-generation Latinos in America.

RESOURCES

Conchas, G. Q., & Hinga, B. M. (2015). *Cracks in the schoolyard: Confronting Latino educational inequality*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

In this book, the authors challenge deficit models of schooling and features achievement cases that depict Latinos as active actors, rather than hopeless victims, in the quest for social and economic mobility. These counter narratives will help educators and policy makers fill the cracks in the schoolyard that often create disparity and failure for youth and young adults.

Gándara P, & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

This book describes the cumulative disadvantages faced by Latino children in the complex U.S. school systems. It is also a call to action and essential reading for those involved in planning the future of U.S. schools.

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