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Achieving a college education: The psychological experiences of Latina/o community college students

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological and subjective experiences of Latina/o community college students. The impact of these experiences on their persistence toward achieving their education goals is also examined. Qualitative interviews with 15 community college students yielded eight themes: Overcoming personal and social challenges, maturation, self-discovery and college adjustment, self-efficacy, continuously strategizing, sense of purpose, perception of faculty, perception of advisors, and guided and groomed by family to succeed. Implications for practice and recommendations for community colleges are discussed.

Keywords

Latinas/os; persistence; higher education; college aspirations; psychological experiences

Introduction and purpose of study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the psychological and affective experiences of Latina/o students, including those that might contribute to persistence toward achieving their higher education goals. Understanding how their college aspirations and academic goals are shaped and maintained is important considering that only 10% of Latinas/os graduate with baccalaureate degrees (National Center for Education Statistics quoted in President's Advisory Committee, 2003; Sullivan 2007). Latinas/os take longer to earn a postsecondary degree, with only 23% completing a bachelor's degree within ten years of leaving high school, compared with 47% of white students (Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). Although there has been increasing interest in examining these experiences, most studies have focused on Latinas/os attending four-year institutions, not community college. It is important to understand the experiences of Latina/o junior college students. This knowledge can help junior colleges to better meet these students' needs, particularly their transferring goals.

Literature review

More Latinas/os are attending college today than ever before. However, Latinas/os remain underrepresented in higher education, corresponding to only 11% of all college students (Santiago, 2007). Reasons for this under-representation have been widely documented. These include: poor K-12 academic preparation, poor guidance, excessive reliance on standardized testing for admissions decisions, low income, and incomplete parental knowledge about college and how to finance college (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Collatos,

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Morell, Nuno & Lara, 2004; Bagnato, 2005; Sullivan, 2007). Of those enrolled in college, less than half of Latina/o college students receive a Bachelor's degree (Fry, 2004). The literature examining Latina/o retention and persistence toward degree attainment is extensive. Studies have critically analyzed how institutional structures affect student engagement, as well as academic and nonacademic experiences of students. More recently, contextual frameworks incorporating social, psychological, and cultural factors have expanded our knowledge of those who drop out and those who persevere toward degree attainment (Oseguera, Locks, and Vega, 2009). These studies have shown that Latinas/os' college experiences are fraught with dissatisfaction, cultural incongruence, and disenchantment with pursuing further education, all of which affect retention and persistence (Castellanos et al, 2006; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004). Conversely, psychosociocultural factors that account for Latinas/os perseverance toward degree completion include: self-efficacy, support from peers, family, and faculty, and congruence between personal goals and those of the institution (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Some studies suggest that a sense of belonging, based on positive college experiences and diversity encounters, can also prevent attrition, while perceptions of race discrimination have negative effects on persistence and retention (Strayhorn, 2008; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). While sense of belonging encourages help-seeking and persistence behaviors (Miville & Constantine, 2006), the ability to establish new or maintain old support networks also helps students persevere toward degree completion (Saunders and Serna, 2004).

Departing from past cultural deficit frameworks, researchers also looked at ways in which parents, particularly mothers and their messages of encouragement, positively impact high school students' development of college aspirations (Ceja, 2004; Ortiz, 2004; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Also, Phinney, Dennis, and Osorio (2006) suggest that helping family and proving self-worth are important motivations associated with college persistence and success.

Much of the current knowledge student persistence comes from studying those attending four-year colleges, notwithstanding the fact that 60% of Latinas/os begin their postsecondary education at a community college (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Padilla, 2005). A study by Chang (2005) focusing on two-year college students found that Latinos, along with Asian/Pacific Islanders, showed lower levels of disposition toward faculty interactions than African Americans. In part, this might be due to a lack of "critical mass" of Latino faculty, a factor that can lead to more student integration and positive academic attitude (Hagerdon, Chi, Cepada, and McLain, 2007). Research shows that less than 13% of Latino community college students transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions and complete a Bachelor's degree (Fry, 2004). Individual and institutional barriers that affect transfer include discouragement, multiple competing demands, and lack of academic preparation (Ornelas and Solozano, 2004).

Additional knowledge regarding the experiences and characteristics of non-traditional, part-time, working adult Latina/o students who attend community colleges is needed. Particularly, their affective and psychological experiences, which may affect their perseverance toward degree attainment, are not well understood, as others have suggested (Oseguera, Lock, & Vega, 2009; Padilla, 2005). Toward this end, this study used a student-centered framework (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009) to examine the experiences of community college Latino students who transferred or were in the process of transferring to four-year institutions. A particular intention of this study was capturing the students' "own voices," and meanings they constructed about educational opportunities and achievements. The perceptions of Latino students in their own voice can provide critical understanding for faculty and administrators in community college.

Methodology

This study analyzes data obtained by this researcher through one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fifteen Latina/o community college students. Each student was interviewed once for approximately one and a half hours. Participants were asked about their educational experiences, and any hurdles they may have overcome to reach their educational goals, including transferring to a university. Students were invited to reflect on a wide range of experiences, including experiences they had with educational systems prior to coming to college. The interview also inquired about support systems that contributed to their academic success; barriers to accessing resources and how these barriers were overcome; and institutional structures or persons that were helpful to them. Specific questions included: Why did you decide to go to college and what are your motivations for continuing? What in your family or background supports and motivates you to achieve college goals? What has validated your experience to stay the course? What emotional difficulties have they encountered? What were your greatest fears before starting college? What excites you the most about college? What worries you the most? How is college different than what you expected? What have been major barriers in pursuing a degree? What has been your experience with faculty, peers, and services provided at the college (i.e., advising, services to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions)? How did you figure out what degree to pursue, what classes to take, and which university to transfer to? Their narratives described their feelings, attitudes, and reactions toward the institutional environment, faculty, and family life. They described in-depth the events, relationships, and situations that have inspired, motivated, and affected them positively and negatively.

Sample

The data presented in this study is part of a larger qualitative study examining barriers to higher education for Hispanic/Latino/Latina students attending or who had attended community colleges. Although the sample in the larger study included 25 students, data for only 15 students were analyzed in the current study. Judgment sampling (Marshall, 1996) was used to ensure a broad range of subjects and to include as many variables and characteristics as possible. Participants varied by major, community college, geographical location, gender, and age, which ranged from 22 to 44. All were either Mexican immigrants or of Mexican descent. Six of fifteen participants were married, and nine of them lived with at least one parent at the time of the interview. Six participants also had young children. Over half of the participants were first in their family to go to college. Except for one, all participants had parents who did not attend college, and most parents only had grammar school education. Students came from seven community colleges located in the Chicago and South suburban area. At the time of the interview, two participants had graduated with associate degrees and had already transferred, and were attending classes at a four-year university. One had finished a baccalaureate degree. The others had completed most of their classes and were working on transferring to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Participants learned of the study through word of mouth, or through college advisors or counselors contacted by the author. Interviews captured experiences in students' own words.

Data analysis and results

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Hyper Research™ software was used for coding and analysis. Core themes were identified. Subsequently, empirically grounded thematic patterns (Strauss & Cobin, 1990) were identified, and themes were collapsed into similar categories. This analysis revealed eight themes: Overcoming personal and social challenges, maturation, self-discovery and college adjustment, self-efficacy, continuously strategizing, sense of purpose, perception of faculty, perception of advisors, and guided and

groomed by family to succeed. Direct quotes have been presented in the following section as indicative of respondents' views.

Overcoming personal and social challenges

The majority of the sample, most of whom were children of immigrant parents or immigrants themselves, believed that being member of a minority group compromised their educational opportunities. Most respondents reported receiving conflicting messages that they should integrate and succeed in school while at the same time they would feel excluded, particularly in high school. These messages resulted in them feeling marginalized by teachers, and fearing that they did not have the right attributes to become college students. A common theme in their stories illustrating this sentiment was wrestling with the aspiration to go to college and fearing that college was not for them. Some of their comments included:

I thought, "I don't have any money, how can I go to college?" I thought I would be cleaning hotels for the rest of my life.

If I think back, I can tell you that in high school, because they only took the top 10% to visit colleges, and I wasn't one of them. So I said to myself, I don't belong [in college].

I went to my counselor to find out about how to get into college and he told me to look in the phone book.

Respondents' narratives demonstrated that overcoming this sense of marginalization and hopelessness was a process of self-discovery: it entailed breaking away from internalized messages about their worth as individuals and students, or from family and social dynamics that could hold them back. Here are some of their comments:

I used to pass through here to go to work every day. And, I said, "nice, they got to go to college. Wait a minute, why not me?"

I was raised in an environment of poverty and domestic violence ... I knew I was smart but I thought I was going to end up addicted to drugs or something.

Being undocumented didn't stop me, because my parents didn't bring me here to cut grass! ...and that is why I wanted to get into college.

Sixty percent of the sample did not go to college immediately following high school, including two who dropped out and later received their GED. These respondents described reaching a critical realization at some point that they "wanted and deserved more," and that beyond being "labor workers"... "Hispanics have so much more to offer." They harbored the desire to go to college for years, but indicated that prior experiences generated self-doubt about their ability to succeed academically. They also feared having to compete with students coming straight out of high school who might be better prepared. At the same time, the value attributed to their own and to their family's struggle in overcoming social and economic barriers, inspired and persuaded them finally to pursue college. One student, who did not enroll in college until six years after finishing high school, said that it was important for her to shape her own life, not to "simply do things the way our parents did. Getting married and raising children is not our biggest achievement." Responses indicated that all these challenges were interpreted as elements that informed the decision to go to college, but also forced them to look realistically at barriers. For example, one student went into the Marine Corps after graduating from high school. He said:

I didn't have the grades for college, nor the money. So I got into the Marine Corps in order to pay for college. I was stationed in Hawaii and took Japanese courses. I learned a lot...I became disciplined and organized.

Although some considered the possibility of enrolling at a four-year university, doubts about succeeding in college, coupled with low socioeconomic status, led participants to believe that their chances to thrive at a junior college were higher than at a four-year institution. This is consistent with other research on the attributes of community colleges that make them appealing for Latinos and other minorities: affordability, convenient class schedule permitting students to work, and open admissions (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004; Sullivan, 2007). Here are some typical comments by participants:

Well, it was the price, but also I didn't want to jump into a university, because you know, I didn't exactly know what I was getting into. And I was scared to make a big step, like what if it turned out like I am not smart as I used to be, or... I was just scared.

Because the only one in town here in Kankakee is Bradley, and the other one is Olivet Nazarene, and I know that Olivet...being more expensive, so I thought start here, get the 2 year done and then transfer.

Maturation, self-discovery and college adjustment

The majority of the institutions attended were not characterized by elements believed to promote adjustment of minority students, including having a significant number of faculty and students of color, or a culturally sensitive curriculum (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Nevertheless, participants experience the campus as hospitable, and reported a high degree of satisfaction with community college. This satisfaction had to do with gaining valuable experiences, skills, and assets, and not relating to college as a "social experience," as several students reported. Their responses indicated that most believed that community college helped mature personal and professional goals, and prepared them for the next step. At the same time, several students said that an associate degree was "worth little more than high school," and all of them came to junior college with the intent to transfer to a baccalaureate program to "have a career." However, most of them did not have career plans or clear professional goals initially. For those students, the community college was instrumental in offsetting lack of preparation. The journey into more defined professional plans evolved in several ways: some experimented with taking courses that would familiarize them with a particular field before choosing a major. Others discovered a new career option fitting their personality or aspirations better. Yet others attended classes that might serve several purposes. For example, one student came to the junior college thinking about nursing, but realized that early education might suite her as well. At the time of the interview, she was taking chemistry and microbiology, which would help her to move into either area. In summary, participants felt that the junior college gave them an opportunity to test themselves, receive solid academic preparation, and gain valuable exposure to the types of environments needed to pursue a baccalaureate education. Here is what some students said:

What I needed to know, I wasn't sure. So, I figured, ok, I got some time. Because I knew that I had to take some of the general courses to get a taste...you...realize that there are other fields. There is sociology, there is this, there is that. So, you... discover other professions...and things about yourself.

... after I graduated from high school, I wasn't sure what I was going to major in college. I didn't really have the grade that university people look for, or ACT scores. And I thought it would be better for me to come to [community college] and try to get as many classes as I could. And I know it's not as expensive as those 4-year universities in the city.

I had all these ...misconceptions, you know, I was ignorant. But once I started coming here and once I was taking those classes, I enjoyed it. [community college] opened the doors for me, gave me a scholarship, made all my classes transferable.

Studies have found that Latina/o students often lack the social capital needed for academic success, including information networks and understanding of college norms, values, and behaviors (Coleman, 1988; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008). In part, satisfaction with the junior college was related to respondents' acquiring or enhancing social capital.

Another subjective element that contributed to respondents' satisfaction was perception of rapid adjustment to the college environment. Respondents did not experience social isolation and marginalization, commonly reported by underrepresented students. What then accounts for their adjustment? Responses suggested that students felt a sense of vicarious familiarity with the college they chose to attend. Half of respondents indicated that they relied on the experience of family members who had graduated from the college, mostly siblings or cousins, and taking this experience into consideration worked to their advantage. Some of them were brought to the college by these family members to tour the campus and get a feel for the institution. This "inside information" gave them a priori knowledge about institutional roadblocks (i.e. courses or faculty to avoid) and supports, helped them to adapt to college environment, and guided them to better understand academic expectations. In turn, this indirect knowledge increased their sense of comfort, competence, and feelings of readiness to face college.

Self-efficacy

All students in the study reported feeling confident that they could accomplish their academic goals, and depend on their resources and cognitive abilities. Their responses demonstrated that, although some may have doubted their ability to succeed prior to enrolling in college, all had come to trust their ability to navigate an academic environment. (Gloria, Castellanos & Orozco, 2005) found this confidence to be an important attitude of Latinas who succeed in four-year institutions. In the present study, self-efficacy was attributed to having tested themselves in community college and having succeeded at something that was not expected of them. All sacrifices (personal, financial, emotional) were made worthwhile by the belief that they had achieved a major milestone in development. Several students described themselves as being "perseverant" and "determined," and as individuals who did not "give up easily."

Another element related to self-efficacy and satisfaction came from subjective experience of the campus diversity. It is important to note that only one out of the eight colleges included in the sample had a significant number of Latinas/os; the majority of the students being Caucasian and African American. However, despite being a minority on their campuses, most did not feel a discrepancy between academic culture and their own culture, as others have suggested about this population (Gloria & Robinson, 1996; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Although not all, several respondents felt that they brought a different perspective to classroom discussions and added to the dialogue. They reported feeling that their viewpoints were appreciated on the whole. In turn, most said they participated in a culturally broader, more global context. Their responses indicated they saw themselves as being part of a multiracial, cosmopolitan, and culturally sophisticated environment. This gave them the confidence to negotiate contexts that were not predominantly Latino or culturally homogeneous.

Another sentiment related to self-efficacy was confidence that they were getting greater value for their investment by starting off at junior college. Almost of all of them expressed the belief that it did not make sense to spend time and money at a four-year institution if unsure they could succeed in higher education, or if unclear about their professional goals. Their own resources, as well as their family's, were simply too limited and precious to risk wasting them.

Continuously strategizing

Themes surfaced in students' narratives that indicated the need for constant problem-solving in order to make the most out of limited resources and persist to graduation. Financial concerns, the chief factor in enrolling in junior college, continued to produce stress and emotional tension as participants progressed through courses. Participants described how they felt financially burdened, and spoke of the strain that college put on themselves and their families. Most of them were ineligible for financial aid or scholarships, and had to take loans or pay out of pocket. This hardship forced them, at times, to take reduced course loads during a given term, and, for some, to delay graduation. For the majority, anxiety and worry were ubiquitous experiences not just related to college expenses, but also to paying other bills, including day care for those who had children, and gas to get to campus. The ones who worked part time to dedicate more time to school (or simply because they could not stay out of work completely while pursuing their education) feared compromising their health due to lack of medical insurance and benefits.

One strategy that almost all of them tried, at one point or another, was to both go to school and work full time. Particularly those students who had been out of high school for many years felt a sense of urgency to finish their associate degree and transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution. Undertaken to graduate faster, this strategy made it hard for those students to get good grades. Most of them could not go on for more than a year following this strategy, and ended up going part time subsequently. Some participants had to withdraw from classes to not hurt their grades. Others, because they had been out of school for so long, would take what they considered "easy courses" first, leaving the more demanding ones for later.

Actually, I should have finished. But I can't take more, the most I took in the semester is 4 classes, and working full-time, and come to school full-time, it was horrible. [...] I was able to get a B in my classes, but I used to cry all the time, because it is so much, you know, a lot of pressure and a lot of stress.

Since attending community college was chosen out of necessity, respondents felt compelled not to waste time and money, and make the most out of their possibilities. With little time for anything else, most did not come to campus unless they had classes. Although some said they would participate in extra-curricular activities, if other priorities were not pressing, most also said they did not want to get distracted from goals of finishing college. This keeping one's gaze on the future led respondents to take advantage of every minute and every opportunity to learn. Hence, those who did participate in out of classroom activities did so only if the activity would advance academic or professional goals. For example, one student said she became involved with the college's nursing association, only because it provided support and mentoring to nursing students, something she could benefit from professionally.

Students explained that having a plan to juggle competing priorities kept them from giving up and dropping out. This included planning in advance how many hours a week they would have to study, making arrangements for their children's care (for those who needed it) and contingency plans, and anticipating barriers related to work demands. For example, ten of the students managed to go full time at some point in college life, and all of them worked at least part time. Some worked out arrangements with employers that included fitting classes into their work schedule. These arrangements were not easy for the student, often requiring them to start their day very early and finish late, forfeiting lunch, and exhaustively driving. Here are some of their comments:

[...] so what I do is instead of leaving work at 4:30 like what I usually do, I told them if I can start at seven, one hour earlier, and then, come back at 2 and stay until 6. Instead of 4:30. So, I can make my 8 hours.

Actually, [I would come home] always by eleven, or eleven thirty, you know...I was so tired, and I try to stay up and study, but I am human... So, I managed to change my schedule. I work and leave at 4, start school at 6. I leave at 4, go home, help my daughter with her homework, come to school at 6.

Sense of purpose

Researchers found that, for Latinas/os attending four-year institutions, integration into campus life, cultural congruity with the institutional goals, and sense of belonging might affect persistence (Strayhorn, 2008; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Instead, students in this study indicated that sense of purpose drove them and was critical to persisting. A deeper motivation to concretize life purpose resulted in psychological gains that kept them persevering. This sense of purpose manifested itself in several ways. Most did not integrate in college by participating in activities outside regular courses, nor did they spend emotional energy trying to fit in. For these participants, college represented a step toward making “meaningful contributions” to their families, community and society. More specifically, students spoke about how they stayed motivated by their commitment:

I am doing it for my parents, specially my father. Just the way my parents talk to me about school, I always knew that my dad wanted to have a career but he couldn't. Because if my dad had the means, he would have been able to put himself through school, he would have done it.

[...] and it's not the money. I am not doing it for the money. I've talked to a lot of people [...] who actually finished college. They are not working in their field, and they went to school for years, but they hate it. I don't want that. What I want is to know 'what is my unique contribution to the world.'

Those who did get involved in extra-curricular activities waited until their last term, just prior to transferring to baccalaureate-granting colleges. The majority, however, reported that they “came to class and left” (to go to work or to take care of family), and tried to stay focused on studies, not wanting to “distract themselves:”

I don't really socialize, because if I know I have a break time and I don't need to make a phone call or anything, I start eating or start working on homework. I use every minute, because my time is so precious.

I have responsibilities, I can't play around with my education, I have this opportunity, I even got financial aid.

For most participants this sense of purpose had to do with recognizing their role in relationship to others, and seeing a connection between their own and others' unfolding. These participants spoke of how desire to be role models propelled them to achieve academic success. This desire seemed an important source of motivation because, despite their contribution to American society, few Latinas/os are seen as examples to be emulated. One student indicated that her community college experience made her feel that she could make a difference in others' lives, and be a source of encouragement for them. Others also said:

I want to be a role model for nephews and nieces and even my friends. And, you know, one of them, she has two kids. But I used to always tell her that if I can do it, you can do it.

[...] my kids, because my older son he is 9, I want him to look up to me as a role model, and I thought if I don't show him that I can do it, then he's going to think down the road "mom didn't go to college, why should I?"

My sister is also trying to college, I can't stop... I need to keep her motivated and be a role model [...]

For some, a sense of purpose was also related to what participants described as their contribution to family. This included giving back the effort that parents (and sometimes partners) put into raising and supporting them, or believing that families would be better off because of them getting a degree. Students' subjective experience of this responsibility was not recounted as burdensome or onerous. Being the first or one of the few in their family to go to college, respondents indicated, was one way to ensure that their families would be better off because of them getting a degree. Responses indicated they saw their contribution with a sense of responsibility and pride. Sense of purpose extended toward concern for their communities as well, and for those they perceived as being "left behind." One student expressed her desire to motivate children in her community and her friends who were less knowledgeable about a college education. This commitment, she said, "kept her going through the difficult moments."

Sense of purpose also helped participants cope with the difficulties of maintaining relationships outside immediate family, due to school commitments and schedule. The majority of the sample reported, since most of their friends did not go to college, they no longer socialized with them regularly. However, students believed this was a "temporary" situation and that they would resume those relations once college was over.

Perception of faculty

Several elements emerged regarding participants' relationship with faculty. Positive interactions with faculty have been shown to favorably impact students' persistence toward degree completion and satisfaction with higher education (Terezini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). This study confirms these findings. Responses reveal that some of their most gratifying experiences were positive relationships established with professors and instructors, whom they perceived as role models. The most common comment was "professors were very good and supportive." Students sought faculty they perceived as experts in their area of interest. These were seen as mentors and guides regarding future professional options and career opportunities. They spent time with faculty in and out of the classroom, and relied on them for support to resolve academic difficulties, discuss personal problems, and navigate the campus' bureaucracy. Some of these relationships were particularly meaningful in leading students to access certain resources that would not otherwise be available. These resources include letters of recommendation or reference, information regarding specific scholarships, review of students' scholarship applications, and professional contacts in the student's field of interest. Respondents also pointed out that having conversations and interactions with faculty outside of the classroom made them feel cared for, and comfortable asking for help when needed. The faculty's welcoming attitude meant that instructors were concerned about them as students, but that instructors also saw them as individuals. Several students reported that interactions with faculty motivated them to pursue career goals, and to anticipate professional possibilities. Students also relied on faculty for advice related to the transferring process, including when and what classes to take, what baccalaureate-granting institutions were in the area, and even financial aid.

She was very knowledgeable about the programs here. And, she was able to pick out each student and say, "you know what, they got this, I think they got this. Why don't you check it out?"

It is important to note that Latino faculty was underrepresented in most of the institutions in this study. However, responses suggest that participants were not deterred by cultural difference, and generally did not feel isolated from faculty. The majority developed significant relationships with racially diverse instructors, and lack of Latino professors was not seen as critical. Although some had had encounters with culturally insensitive professors, these experiences appeared infrequent for the majority of the sample. Faculty characteristics that contributed to respondents' motivation to seek contact included open-mindedness and enthusiasm about their courses. Participants valued faculty who held high expectations regarding academic performance, gave them feedback that was useful to learning and development, and demonstrated commitment toward their growth. Also, not being singled out as a "minority" student, and being treated as capable was mentioned often.

Perceptions of advisors

In contrast to respondents' positive experiences with faculty were their experiences with the community college advisors. All participants, except one, reported trouble accessing information and support from them. For many, the relationship with advisors was one of the most difficult aspects of their college experience, described as "frustrating," "disappointing," and "unhelpful." Common problems included counselors' lack of knowledge or unfamiliarity with the students' area of interest; ill advisement regarding what classes to take in order to transfer or graduate, and inaccurate information about financial aid. They also reported having to solicit help from professors or more experienced family members to make academic decisions and put a lot of effort themselves into researching institutions they wished to transfer to. Most participants did not understand fully the institutional structures of articulation between schools, even after they talked to advisors. Sometimes students took courses for months without clearly understanding what classes were needed toward a degree or transfer process. Others lost credits upon transferring to a four-year institution because the particular institution did not accept all their coursework. Here is a comment that illustrates participants' frustration:

You know what, at the beginning, I took 2 to 3 classes [...]that I didn't need...how am I supposed to know that I needed a lab in order to be transferable to [...]. My advisor... she wasn't paying attention.

These experiences are consistent with prior research (CCSSE, 2006). A more insidious aspect of these encounters was that students in the sample felt devalued, mistreated, and discouraged, as evidenced by the following comments:

She's like "So, what class do you want to take?" and I said "I don't know". She said "how old are you?". And I was like "26". She said "What do you mean you don't you know what class you like to take?!" I told her that it was my first day ever in campus, I was lost. All I knew is that I wanted to go to school." She told me 'You need something better than that, you need to know what class you want,'.

They [advisors] have a very important job – they can make or break a student!. I have had terrible experiences with advisors

However, participants who were involved with TRIO, federally funded programs to increase access to higher education, described positive experiences with their counselors and advisors. They reported that TRIO advisors exposed them to four-year universities, took them to tour the colleges they might transfer to, and helped them find scholarships and resources. In some cases, the TRIO staff at the community college put them in contact with the TRIO program at the four-year institution after they transferred. One student said that when she spoke to her regular advisor she often felt that completing her education "appeared impossible." But she always felt supported and protected by her TRIO counselor:

I felt that [TRIO] want me to succeed, I could really count on TRIO counselors, that they would point out in the right direction.

Guided and groomed by family to succeed

Not finding support and guidance through the regular mechanisms, students relied on help and resources from elsewhere. In terms of morale and emotional support, the single most commonly cited factor was family and relatives. One student explained how her elderly parents, whom she cared for, made her “a little breakfast on the way out.” This comment reflects what Ceja (2004) and others have found: Latino parents transmit direct as well as indirect messages about the importance of education. In this study, parents supported their children’s educational goals by offering concrete support, such as baby-sitting children while they attend classes, or excusing them from family functions. Other comments included:

My parents and I clean the home of a very rich couple for ...years. [...] So my parents asked them for a loan to pay for my college – and they just gave us the money. So I can’t play around here...

My mom always wanted me to go to college. She always supports whatever I want to do. Like, school, or anything like that.

If I am studying, my mom tries to ...not make noise, she tells my sister don’t make noise. So, they support me.... in their way, in the way they can.

Equally important, respondents reported that parents always believed in them and in their capacity to do well in school, and that parents would do whatever it took to help them succeed. The sense of purpose discussed earlier was further reinforced by the support of immediate family. “My parents are thrilled that at least one of their kids is going to graduate from college,” said one student. Others said:

And my parents, I don’t know why, they were always more strict in school to me, maybe because they knew that I was a good student.

They give me consejos (advise), give me motivation, they tell me ‘we will do what we need to do, if we need to get a loan we will get one’

Women, the majority of the sample, emphasized the role that partners (including husbands, fiancés, and boyfriends) played in their persisting through college. The majority of the women in the study had partners who themselves did not have a college degree. In some cases, these men had put their own college goals aside in order to support their partner. Here is what they said:

My partner (husband) has been my main source of support. He pushed me to go back to school and motivates me to finish the program.

That’s why he was telling me that, “oh, she told me that you want to go to school, ... why don’t you go?” And I was, “I don’t have time, I have a daughter, are you crazy, I have to work.” And I talked to my mom, she was like, “you have us, you are so Go back to school, that’s what you want to do, go back to school.”

I am so stressed out, all the homework....so...I thought about giving up. But he told me: you mean, after all those years, you are just going to throw them away... No way, you have to finish school. Even if I have to work two full-time jobs, you have to finish school.”

In some cases, when students had a family member, generally a sibling or a cousin, who was familiar with college expectations, that family member was sought for assistance. Responses

showed how much participants depended on family for validation, but also to make crucial decisions regarding academic matters. Here are some comments:

My cousin...she started telling me you have to divide your time this way and that way. [...] In the end of the semester, I was getting Cs. She said, "You have to drop that class, that's going to affect your GPA."

My sister told me "start taking 2 classes instead of 3." "Let's see, if you take 2 next semester if you still get C again, then you need to start taking just one." So I said, "No, I'm never going to finish." But you know, she actually opened my eyes later on. And I'm like, "yes, she's right."

Limitations

The major limitations of the present study are the small sample size and the use of a judgment sample. Despite of a small sample, thick descriptions and information-rich narratives from students in various sites provided further knowledge and insight (Merriam, 1998). Also, results need to be interpreted with an understanding of the impact of bias on the sample selection. In addition, participants may have favored some aspects of their experience over others in their narratives. While the results of this study cannot be generalized, it is important to note that the purpose of the study was not intended to find generalizable results, but rather to provide additional insight regarding the subjective and affective experiences of Latina/o junior college students. The results of this study are presented here for consideration, and yield one group of students' experiences with seven community colleges.

Discussion

This study explored psychological and subjective experiences of Latina/o junior college students as they persist toward achieving educational goals. The perception of their own strengths and development as college students, the significance of their relationships with faculty, and the importance of family support were also highlighted. Findings showed that Latinos' experiences in community college are marked by hardship and distress, but also by personal rewards and growth. Analysis of the data suggests that meanings attributed to these experiences influenced students' determination to persevere in college.

Findings show similarities between the psychological and affective experiences of Latinas/os who attend junior college and those who attend four-year institutions. Psychological resilience (Ceja, 2004) strengthened participants' motivation to overcome the social and economic barriers that limited access to higher education. Once in college, self-efficacy, satisfaction with college experience, and a sense of purpose characterized the subjective experiences of the students who developed a "college-going identity" (Collatos et al., 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004), and persisted toward degree attainment. Beyond its economic value, the community college was perceived as essential in mediating barriers to success, including the social and intellectual capital needed to achieve their goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

Even though the majority of the institutions included did not predominantly serve Latinos, participants did not experience cultural incongruence, generally reported by Latinas/os enrolled in four-year, predominantly white institutions. There are several ways to interpret this finding. It suggests that these students' understanding of diversity goes beyond ethnicity or nationality, and that what they desire is to feel part of a global, multicultural mosaic. It also suggests that involvement and interactions with diverse individuals (including diversity of culture and class) might contribute to enhanced proficiency and competence in a rapidly changing society. This finding does not imply that students were unaware of the

environment's limitations, including lack of diversity themes in the curriculum, lack of Latino faculty, and the fact that Latinos were a minority group on campus. But coupled with the sense of purpose, and in the context of the other results, this finding tells us that Latino students possess personal and protective factors that might prevent them from experiencing rejection and motivate them to overcome challenges. A sense of purpose in life, described in part as a desire to help their families, their communities and society, was a powerful motivating factor in attaining a college education.

This study is consistent with prior research regarding the crucial role faculty and family support play in encouraging, inspiring, and stimulating students toward academic achievement. Students spent considerable time consulting with and seeking advice from faculty. Students experienced these relationships as rewarding and affirming. Findings related to family support show that, despite stereotypes of machismo, Latino men played important roles in supporting the educational pursuits and achievement of their partners. More research into gender-specific roles and how they relate to Latinas' educational attainment is needed.

Implications for Educators and Recommendations

Two-year colleges must continue preparing themselves to serve Latina/os since, more than any other higher education institution, they play a critical role in educating them. As more Latinos become aware that a Baccalaureate degree is the minimum needed to succeed professionally, junior colleges will need to be more intentional in developing what Ornelas and Solorzano (2004) call a "culture of transfer." A 2008 report by Excelencia in Education (Santiago, 2008) described innovative approaches to advising developed by several Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)*, most of them community colleges. These include establishing prompt and systematic relationships with "first-time-in-college" freshman, and reviewing their progress toward degree completion regularly. More research is needed to determine the effect of such purposeful and sustained efforts to increase persevering behaviors. In addition, institutions should provide ample opportunities for frequent dialogue between advisors and students. Dialogues could be organized as forums or open discussions, and students invited to share their educational experiences, their perceptions of the supports available to them, and their college goals. Such encounters can be powerful tools to dispel stereotypes and help advisors see Latina/o students as capable and committed to achieving higher education.

More research is needed to determine specific ways in which this relationship affects Latina/o students' persistence toward degree attainment. These relationships are an important factor affecting students' personal satisfaction, and academic adjustment to community college. Faculty can invite students into supportive relationships in more intentional ways, and in concert with reinforcing a culture of transfer.

This study shows that a sense of purpose, defined in part as a sense of responsibility and commitment to others, is a powerful motivator for Latina/o students' persistence toward degree attainment. Community colleges are well positioned to help Latinos merge their academic goals with their personal goals of social justice toward their families and communities. Toward this end, academic activities (i.e. assignments, readings, civic engagement activities, service learning) can enhance their motivation to persevere in college.

*HSIs – public or private degree-granting higher education institutions with enrollments of at least 25% Latino undergraduate students.

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