

March 2015

## College Knowledge as Cultural Capital: Reshaping parental involvement to increase college attainment

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### Introduction

The lack of cultural capital—defined as high status cultural signals used in cultural and social selection<sup>1</sup>—in the realm of post-secondary education has long since represented a barrier to entry in low-income communities. In its current form, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) fails to require State Educational Agencies (SEAs) or Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to provide families with information regarding post-secondary attainment. In a 2002 study, the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute surveyed 1,054 Latino parents from across the country and assessed their college knowledge. The results of the study revealed that nearly 66 percent of the parents surveyed failed the college knowledge test.<sup>2</sup> The high rate of failure on this assessment draws attention to the challenges facing many Latino parents across the country. College knowledge is a form of cultural capital that many Latino parents do not have access to. Failure to access this knowledge could drastically limit a student's chances of attending a college. The reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity for Congress to improve Latino enrollment rates by strengthening the parental involvement provisions already present in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the most recent reauthorization of ESEA. By amending the legislation to incorporate crucial language on parental engagement, Congress will provide states and LEAs with

important guidance regarding the type of engagement that should be taking place.

### Latinos and Academic Barriers

By 2060, Latinos are projected to represent more than one-third of all U.S. children. Of the total population under the age of 14, Latinos will represent 38%, compared to Whites (33%), African Americans (13%), and Asians (7%).<sup>3</sup> With the U.S. Latino population slated to grow exponentially over the next century, it is imperative that we equip students with the skills necessary to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy. A 2014 study, produced by Burning Glass Technologies—a Boston based labor market analytics firm—states, “increasingly, employers are seeking baccalaureate talent for what have been sub-baccalaureate jobs.”<sup>4</sup> This hiring trend highlights the importance of college attainment for current and future generations of Latinos. Despite the recent jump in Latino college enrollment rates<sup>5</sup>, as a subgroup, Latino students still fall behind their peers in various categories.

In 2010, 71% of Latino high school students graduated within four years of enrolling in high school, compared to Asians (94%), Whites (83%), and African Americans (66%).<sup>6</sup> The retention of nearly one-third of all Latino students is an indication of a larger systemic problem. Many parents do not know what their children

need to do in school and how to ensure their children are on an educational track that will lead to college.<sup>7</sup> Although many Latino students have aspirations of attending college, a lack of guidance could lead them to encounter various obstacles. University of Georgia Professor Yvette Q. Getch identifies three major barriers to achieving at a high academic level, “the lack of teacher support, the lack of school counselor involvement, and students being left on their own to figure out the process.”<sup>8</sup> These obstacles can hinder student achievement and ultimately limit a student's post secondary opportunities. However, if a parent were to possess the necessary cultural capital, they could advocate on behalf of their child, to ensure that they were receiving quality teacher and counselor support. Unfortunately, too many students lack such advocates and are forced to suffer the consequences.

### The Challenge with Nurturing Latino Educational Aspirations

The presence or absence of key academic interventions—good teachers/counselors, challenging curriculum, strong support services—during a student's schooling can determine whether a student will have the opportunity to apply to college or not. In order to make the successful transition from high school to college, Latino youth need to move through a series of milestones and prerequisites. These

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milestones often bring a series of tough questions through which parents and students must navigate through. The ability to utilize counselors, teachers, and college representatives as information sources is associated with increasing college knowledge and can prove helpful when making tough academic choices.<sup>9</sup> However, Latino students and parents must also contend with societal pressures when reaching these milestones. Patricia Gándara of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA argues, “Societal beliefs about the intellectual or cultural inferiority of Latinos can result in both constrained opportunities and choices.”<sup>10</sup> Although Latino parents may have high aspirations for their children, opposing societal expectations of what their children are likely to achieve, often moderate or stifle these aspirations. Many Latino students struggle to effectively navigate the series of milestones they face before applying to college and this can negatively shape their college aspirations.

Teachers and counselors can send both verbal and non-verbal messages to students about the amount of confidence they have in their abilities.<sup>11</sup> “Grubb (2001) indicated that school counselors treat low-income and minority students as academically incapable and steer them towards less rigorous academic or vocational programs.”<sup>12</sup> This biased approach can lead to larger systemic problems. New York University Professor Pedro Noguera explains, “The rewards of education—namely, acquisition of knowledge and skills and ultimately, admission into a post-secondary institution, and a good paying job—keep the system of education running. If students are not receiving the benefits of the education system, they have little incentive to comply with the system.”<sup>13</sup> The lack of discussion around the topic of post-secondary attainment can have a negative impact on students.

In failing to discuss post-secondary attainment with Latino students, teachers and counselors could be conveying a non-verbal message that negatively shapes the self-perceptions of the very students they seek to help. Negative self-perceptions can hurt student academic performance; this phenomenon is known as *stereotype threat theory*. As defined by University of California, Berkeley Professor Claude Steele, “*Stereotype threat* is being at risk of confirming, as self characteristic, a negative stereotype about ones group.”<sup>14</sup> The threat of confirming the stereotype creates a vulnerability that can hinder performance and lead to low academic achievement in those affected.

Gándara’s premise argues that societal beliefs about Latino students can lead to constraints on their aspirations. Despite being the largest minority group, Latino students have one of the lowest four-year high school graduation rates of any minority group at 61 percent.<sup>15</sup> These low four-year graduation rates support the idea that an overwhelming percentage of Latino students are facing academic challenges. These academic challenges are important because the enrollment of Latino youth in higher education is not a single, discrete event that occurs in the last year of high school. Getting accepted into college is but one step in a long journey of events that begins in middle school.<sup>16</sup> If Latino graduation rates are among the lowest of any subgroup, it may be indicative of a larger systemic problem that goes far beyond pure academics. The Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) investigated student participation in gifted and talented courses and they found that only 17 percent of the students enrolled in gifted and talented courses were Hispanic, whereas white students represented 60 percent.<sup>17</sup> The data demonstrates that Latino students are largely

under-represented in gifted and talented courses. This low level of representation speaks to a larger trend that consistently finds Latino students towards the bottom of most college preparatory metrics. If key recommendations are adopted, a more concerted effort to engage parents could lead to drastic changes in these college preparatory metrics.

### **Parental Involvement is Essential to Post-secondary Education Opportunities**

Parental involvement improves student academic performance, attendance, and graduation rates. It also reduces at-risk behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use. The Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution In Special Education (CADRE) identifies that the most promising opportunities for student achievement occur when families, schools, and communities organizations work together.<sup>18</sup> Changing the parental engagement language currently in ESEA will help to encourage increased collaboration and hopefully improve student achievement.

The systemic threats facing students skew the perceptions of Latino student ability. By matching parental aspirations with teachers, college knowledge, and positive expectations, students stand a greater chance of success. Parents play a pivotal role in the development of student aspirations.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, parental involvement efforts must be intentional with regards to the dissemination of college knowledge.

There is a lack of cultural capital as it pertains to college knowledge of the education system.<sup>20</sup> Johns Hopkins University Professor Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy explains, “Recent college choice studies have examined parents’ cultural and social capital as determinants of college

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access and school counselors as a source of social capital in the college application process.<sup>21</sup> When surveyed, Latino parents overwhelmingly mentioned counselors and teachers as their primary channel for information on post-secondary education. Separately, in a 2010 study examining counselors' beliefs, Holcomb-McCoy explains that counselors believe working with parents on college opportunities is a major part of their job.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, a majority of counselors reported that they "sometimes" conference with parents and almost "never" organize volunteer activities for parents. The juxtaposition of parent and counselor beliefs supports the idea that there is some disconnect between Latino parents and school counselors. Moreover, there is an issue with the dissemination of information if two-thirds of parents fail a college knowledge test while still referencing counselors as their primary source of college knowledge. If counselors are a parent's primary source of college knowledge, steps should be taken to go beyond simply handing out flyers with information. Federal law should provide guidance in the form of targeted language in ESEA. This language should encourage SEAs to prioritize parental engagement and help LEAs focus on developing the college knowledge of their parents. There are examples of parents, schools, and community organizations coming together to improve student achievement through increased parent engagement.

### **NCLR's Program Demonstrates Parental Involvement Affects Successful Outcomes**

The National Council of La Raza's (NCLR) *Padres Comprometidos* program, serves as an example of what can happen when specific attention is given to involving parents in their children's education from

preschool through high school. The program works to build the capacity of Latino parents to acquire the skills they need to engage with schools and develop the skills necessary to play a role in preparing their children for college. An independent evaluation of the *Padres Comprometidos* program, found that involvement in the program resulted in changes in parents' perception and knowledge. Following the program, parents understood the importance of maintaining a high GPA, taking advanced placement courses, and tapping into federal and local resources to pay for college.<sup>23</sup> This program demonstrates how an increased focus on parental involvement can lead to positive outcomes for the student and the parent. The positive outcomes of this program highlight why there is a need for specific language within ESEA that encourages not only parental involvement, but also a specific focus on engaging parents with information regarding college attainment.

### **Parent Engagement in Current Law and Opportunities to Make Improvements**

Current laws like NCLB put forth provisions that seek to enhance parental involvement. Yet, policies still fail to address the lack of cultural capital possessed by Latinos and individuals from low-income backgrounds. Much of the federal policy on parental involvement is very broad despite recent efforts to focus more on parental engagement. The Department of Education released a "Parent Involvement Guidance" that states, "when schools collaborate with parents to help their children learn and when parents participate in school activities and decision-making about their children's education, children achieve at higher levels."<sup>24</sup> It is extremely important that the Department of Education acknowledges the impact parents have on

student achievement, but it stops shy of addressing the importance of collaboration between families and schools. It is this collaborative effort that would be elevated if schools were charged with creating engagement around the conversation of college knowledge.

More recently, the Department of Education made parental involvement and college readiness the centerpiece of its "principles for improving student academic achievement and increasing the quality of instruction." In the department's first principle under ESEA Flexibility, they state:

"To ensure that its college- and career-ready standards are truly aligned with postsecondary expectations, and to provide information to parents and students about the college-readiness rates of local schools, an SEA must annually report to the public on college-going and college credit-accumulation rates for all students and student subgroups in each LEA and each high school in the State."

This excerpt is a step in the right direction with regards to increasing college knowledge through parental involvement. Sec.1118 of NCLB and principle 1 of ESEA Flexibility laid the framework for a more expansive approach to parental involvement. In particular, Sec.1118 provides room for additional legislative recommendations specifically designed to increase parental involvement and college readiness knowledge.

### **Recommendations**

The reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity for Congress to improve Latino enrollment rates by strengthening

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the parental involvement provisions and making them more representative of the need for and expanded effort to disseminate college knowledge to parents. The following provisions would help establish a strong parental role in the education of children across the American education system:

1) The reauthorization of ESEA should amend Section 1118 by inserting a new provision that encourages LEAs to provide guidance on the various secondary education opportunities that could better prepare students for post-secondary education. College attainment is not an individual event; it is instead the culmination of a series of choices that begin early on in a student's life. It is important for schools to assist parents as best they can, by providing them with information on these important events. This is critical for parents who may not be familiar with secondary education opportunities. The language below seeks to provide LEAs with guidance in this area,

Amend. P.L.107-110, after Sec.1118 (a) (2)(F), insert:(G)

(G) Provide parents with information on how to navigate the various secondary education opportunities that may help students prepare for post-secondary education. Including but not limited to, providing information on the Gifted and Talented program, Magnet program, International Baccalaureate program, and Advanced Placement courses.

Providing parents with information on secondary education opportunities could effectively shape the decisions of parents when selecting a school or when helping select their children's classes. By enhanc-

ing parental cultural capital, LEAs could increase student attainment by better preparing parents for these life events.

2) The reauthorization of ESEA should amend Section 1118 by inserting a new provision that encourages LEAs to provide parents with college knowledge. It is important for parents to be aware of the different steps involved in the college attainment process. The research has shown that students achieve at higher levels when parents, schools, and community organizations work in collaboration to advance the needs of the whole child. Currently, there is a gap that exists between parents and counselors that is the result of poor parental engagement regarding issues of college attainment. The introduction of new language in ESEA could bridge the gap. The language below seeks to provide states and LEAs with the guidance necessary to help improve student achievement,

Amend. P.L.107-110, after Sec.1118 (a) (2)(G), insert:(F)

(F) Provide parents with adequate information regarding how to navigate various post-secondary opportunities. Including but not limited to, registering for college enrollment exams (i.e. PSAT, SAT, ACT, etc.), applying to two- and four-year institutions, and applying for financial aid.

By providing parents with adequate college knowledge LEAs can increase graduation rates and the rates of college enrollment.

These provisions seek to bring visibility to parental involvement as an area of improvement for school leaders. The hope is to bring attention to the importance of college knowledge and the need for

direct involvement between schools and parents. These recommendations do not seek to limit local control over when and how to engage parents on these issues. Instead, the goal is to empower local districts to develop creative new ways to engage parents on the importance of college knowledge and empower families to prepare for these important life events.

The two recommendations above assume that the reauthorization of ESEA would follow the current layout of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. If the reauthorization of ESEA should drastically reshape the 2001 version of the bill, in a way that would not permit the above recommendation to be implemented, it is important that any bill voted on, maintain certain important elements. Therefore, any reauthorized version of ESEA should contain:

- Specific language that requires states hold LEAs accountable for developing a parental engagement plan.
- State-developed strategies for supporting LEAs in the development and implementation of new parental engagement practices.
- Language that calls for LEAs to develop parental engagement practices that focus on increasing the college knowledge of its parents.

If Congress fails to maintain the framework of the 2001 version of ESEA, it is imperative that any reauthorized version of ESEA retains protections for parents. The research demonstrates that there is a need for collaboration between schools and parents. Any efforts to roll back the progress that has been made over the years—would only serve to further alienate the nation's most vulnerable populations.

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## Conclusion

By 2060, Latinos are projected to represent more than one-third of all U.S. children. In order to avoid creating a subclass of citizens, it is important that we decrease Latino attrition in our nation's high schools and increase the rate of enrollment into our nation's colleges and universities. The research shows that parental engagement can increase students' chances of going to college. Unfortunately, when surveyed, 66 percent of the Latino parents lacked the essential college knowledge—advanced learning and coursework opportunities from grade school to high school, awareness of college entrance exams, college application processes and timelines, and financial aid options—necessary to help in their children's college preparation process. Programs like NCLR's *Padres Comprometidos* demonstrate the positive effect that a concerted effort to increase parental engagement can have on parents' ability to support their children in post-secondary access and achievement. Current legislation fails to provide specific language that calls for the dissemination of college knowledge through parental engagement. If applied, the recommended amendments to ESEA or other legislative efforts will lead LEAs to better focus their parental engagement efforts on improving the college knowledge of parents. This new focus on college knowledge will help parents better guide their children through the college application process and improve Latino college enrollment numbers across the nation.

## Endnotes

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