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## The Importance of College-Going Culture for Latinos Prior to High School

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### Abstract

The earlier students are exposed to the idea of college and nurtured to believe in their ability to achieve success, the more likely it is that they will live up to those expectations, and feel prepared to achieve their goals. A big component to students' success is access to resources and support systems in school. To be college and career ready means leaving a K-12 system with an adequate academic preparation (including academic planning), social awareness, financial literacy, and a clear understanding of career pathways. Investments in early commitment scholarships, middle school outreach programs, and improved family engagement can ameliorate secondary and postsecondary opportunities for Latino students.

### Background

Narrowing the opportunity gap and fostering an environment for college and career readiness are critical necessities in the 21st century. Creating an inclusive college-going culture for all students in every elementary, middle and high school can better prepare Latinos for college and career success. Latino students comprise 24.9% of all pre-K through 12th grade public school population (The Condition of Education 2016 at a Glance, 2016). The

earlier students are exposed to the idea of college and nurtured to believe they are capable in achieving success, the more likely it is that they will live up to those expectations, and feel prepared to achieve their goals. Currently, the college participation rates for Latinos is at a high 35% (The Condition of Education 2016). However, Latinos ages 25-29 still trail behind other groups in obtaining a four-year degree, at only 15% with a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to 41% Whites, 63% Asians and 22% Blacks obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher (Pew Hispanic Center 2016). For Latino communities, conversations need to be happening with young people and their families regarding postsecondary opportunities and access to information and resources that can help them navigate the educational system and move up the economic ladder. More importantly, it is critical to inform students that a way to combat poverty (that can become intergenerational) is to become educated and well-informed about opportunities available to them beyond high school and how those opportunities can provide them with upward mobility. As per the National Council of La Raza, "poverty and other barriers to economic mobility will never be eradicated unless children from communities of color are thriving" in schools (NCLR, 2016: 6). A big component to students' success is ac-

cess to resources and support systems in school. This entails becoming college and career ready—leaving the K-12 system with an adequate academic preparation (including academic planning), social awareness, financial literacy, and a clear understanding of postsecondary opportunities. These opportunities should encompass: technical, vocational, 2-year, and 4-year institutions.

This paper seeks to present regional and federal initiatives that have helped Latino students and other underserved young people navigate the K-12 educational pipeline and seek postsecondary opportunities—academic and career tracks. Furthermore, this paper seeks to add on to conversations regarding college and career readiness for Latino youth by offering policy recommendations to better serve a community that is rising in numbers and should have opportunities to positively contribute in all sectors of society.

### Importance of College and Career Awareness and Preparedness

Creating a college going culture in K-8th grades is important because these are fundamental years to engage young people and encourage academic success. More importantly, college readiness today simultaneously means

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career readiness. Majority of the jobs in the country now require some postsecondary education. There is a demand for a well-educated workforce, specifically to fill jobs that require a degree in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) or other technical disciplines (Gates Foundation, 2016), because these fields drive the economy. For the United States to maintain its competency in the global economy, it requires a workforce that is skilled (Wyatt, Smith, & Proestler, 2014: 3). Additionally, jobs in these sectors often pay a salary above the poverty line and provide opportunities for career advancement (ACT, 2006). In STEM careers, Latinos are still not well represented, roughly at five percent in comparison to seventy percent Whites (Excelencia in Education, 2015: 19). For the Latino community to achieve such a milestone, they need to be fully equipped beginning early on in their education.

Environments that cultivate a college-going atmosphere are ones in which students feel safe, welcomed, and included in the learning community (Boyd et al. 2008). In the Latino community, drop-out rates continue to exist at a higher rate in comparison to their non-Hispanic counterparts. Although the overall Hispanic drop-out rate is now at 10.6%, it remains higher than White (5.2%) and Black (7.4) drop-out rates (Highlights from The Condition of Education 2016 & Excelencia in Education, 2015: 9). As such, it is imperative to prepare young people to matriculate through primary and secondary school, eventually pursuing a postsecondary education. According to Excelencia in Education, 65 percent Latinos graduate from high school, with 70 percent of this group enrolling in higher education institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2015: 3). Just 22 percent of those enrolled go on to

complete an associate degree or higher. While U.S. Latino students enroll in 2-year institutions up to 1.5 times more than their non-Hispanic White counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2013), they often require additional support in their academic tracts, including course remediation. To be college and career ready means leaving a K-12 system with an adequate academic preparation (including academic planning), social awareness, financial literacy, and a clear understanding of career pathways.

### **At a Glance: U.S. Latinos and their Educational Attainment**

Currently, there are 52.9 million Latinos in the United States (Pew Hispanic) 13 percent of whom have earned a bachelor's degree. Twenty-six percent of all Latinos currently live in poverty in comparison to the 16 percent of the general U.S. population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013). In order to address poverty, access to equitable educational opportunities is critical to generational and economic sustainability. If upward mobility is correlated with meritocracy, it should be noted that Latinos now make up one-fourth of all public-school students, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Overall, Latinos accounted for 29 percent of public preschool students in the U.S.; 27 percent of public school kindergarten students; 25 percent among elementary school students; and 23 percent of public high school students. The latter rate can be attributed to high school drop-out rates. It is important for Latinos to be exposed to college and career readiness topics by the time they reach 8th grade to maximize on the opportunities available to them after high school (College Success Foundation, 2015: 6). For Latino youth, interventions prior to high school are crucial and show a

positive correlation with their success in high school and post-secondary institutions. Students who come from a low-income family and who will be first-generation to graduate from high school have a lower likelihood of being adequately prepared for college, or to be considered college and career ready by the time they graduate from high school. As research conducted by ACT (2008) suggests, "if we want not merely to improve but to maximize the college and career readiness of U.S. students, we need to intervene not only in high school but also before high school, in the upper elementary grades and in middle school" (2). Ultimately, the goal for all Latino students should be to persist and graduate from high school, and from college if they decide to take that route. Students' success in becoming college and career ready is the result of a process extending throughout K-12 grades, not just in one single stage in the educational journey.

### **Why is exposure to College and Career readiness at an earlier age fundamental?**

In the United States, research has demonstrated that the earlier students are equipped with information on how to navigate K-12 and learn about post-secondary opportunities, the more likely they are to graduate on time from high school and pursue opportunities. Moreover, it has been shown many times that an increased focus on college and career readiness in settings prior to high school provides students with an increased likelihood of being successful in high school and beyond. According to a report from ACT in 2016 that measured college readiness of high school students seeking enroll-

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ment in college, 64% of all 2016 U.S. high school graduates took the ACT, an 8.6% increase from 2015 (ACT 2016). The number of underserved students taking the ACT test also increased: 44% among Hispanic/Latino students and 23% among African American students. Overall, 84% of 2016 ACT-tested graduates aspired to obtain a postsecondary education. This report breaks down some data that support the claims made around the importance of college awareness and preparedness, particularly in settings prior to high school (emphasis on 8th grade academic achievement).

Twenty-eight states are now participating in statewide partnerships with ACT on college awareness and preparedness—as such, the number of students tested has increased. This report provides a much deeper and more representative sample in comparison to purely self-selected college-going population. A prominent detail weaved throughout the report is that an 8th grade student's grade is the most important predictor of 12th-grade GPA, followed by academic achievement, and psychosocial and behavioral factors. Earlier access to testing (prior to 12th grade) for students from low-income backgrounds would be beneficial because they would have more opportunities to improve their test scores, and they would be exposed to various postsecondary opportunities with ample time to plan. There was also a clear discrepancy in increased number of students interested in vocational or technical and two-year degrees versus going straight into a four-year college. This suggests that students now better understand that they do not have to go to a four-year university to be successful and that broad opportunities are available from other postsecondary opportunities.

Although this report shows important information, it is not an indicative of all 50 states. These numbers do not take into consideration students who did not have access to information or resources to sign up for the ACT. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind “one of every four public school students are Hispanic, and those numbers are expected to increase in the coming years” (ACT, 2015). There remains a lot of work to be done in preparing young people for college, particularly those that come from a low-income background. ACT research has shown consistently that when students takes rigorous academic courses in middle school, particularly in 8th grade, they are more likely to succeed—do well in high school, graduate on time and go on to postsecondary institutions of learning. Students who come from low-income, and underrepresented background—such as English Language Learners, farm-working, special education—should be encouraged by their teachers to take rigorous academic courses and participate in extracurricular activities. Students learn new skills they otherwise would not in classroom setting such as social skills, decision making abilities, and their increased interest in pursuing postsecondary education.

### **Programs that promote college and career awareness and readiness prior to high school**

#### **Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs**

Currently, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), a federal grant whose purpose is to increase the number of underrepresented students who are prepared to enter and succeed in

postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), serves as an example with its programs catered to promoting and preparing underrepresented students to successfully complete secondary education and enter higher education institutions. GEAR UP, implemented in 1998, provides early intervention services at high-poverty, first-generation middle and high schools. Through the initiatives such as the Career and College Clubs (CCC) and Youth Leadership Summit, students gain access to knowledge on college awareness and preparedness—on the importance of school attendance, matriculation, professionalization, and their impact as positive contributing members of society. More importantly, students who go through GEAR UP have a clear understanding of what college success entails (awareness, persistence, and graduation). Career and College Clubs is implemented at the individual school level—either as part of the school-day academic program or an after-school club. A study conducted by Career and College Clubs in 2015 found that students who engaged in CCC were 85% more likely to enroll in college than their peers who did not participate in the program (National Council for Community and Education Partnerships, 2017).

One limitation of GEAR UP is that it's a competitive grant, so not everyone who would benefit from it has access to the resources or information. As such, it's imperative to look for other ways to provide support in alleviating barriers many Latino students may have in their navigation of K-12 pipeline and eventual pathway to higher education or other opportunities. The services GEAR UP provides can be easily emulated if resources are provided to the schools, which would include staff to serve as college and career

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coaches, materials, and funding to carry out the program.

### **College Advising through AmeriCorps State and National Service**

Some existing AmeriCorps State and National programs (through varied partnerships with either states or local non-profits) place recent college graduates in underserved middle and high schools across the United States to serve as educational support systems such as tutors or College and Career Coaches. Some such examples are College Advising Corps and the College Success Foundation. Both programs work to increase the number of underserved low-income students graduating from high school and pursuing postsecondary opportunities—college or career tracks. While College Advising Corps partner up with fifteen higher education institutions across the country, the College Success Foundation has presence in Washington State and Washington, D.C. Both programs create, or expand on, a college going culture—awareness, preparedness and financial literacy—at the schools served. These initiatives are done through the implementation of school-wide college awareness/readiness curricula, providing students with academic and social enrichment activities such as mentorship, opportunities to visit college campuses, and in Washington State’s case, signing-up eligible students for the Washington State College Bound Scholarship, an initiative that seeks to alleviate the economic hurdles of college for low-income students.

Although these programs have tremendous impact on students served, their shortcomings are the inconsistencies in program longevity or renewability and continuous new coaches. The inconsistency in service can be disruptive for the mission of creating a college-going culture and preparing students to thrive academically. The nature of AmeriCorps programs is for folks to serve one or two term(s) as volunteers—limited monetary compensation plays an important factor on whether folks will serve a second term. For programs like these to have greater impact, these positions (of College and Career Coaches) need to be written in as part of the school budget. There is quantitative data that demonstrates the impact of having college and career coaches at schools (CCC cite). Furthermore, school districts have the capacity to implement college awareness and preparedness curricula by providing the right training for educators to send consistent messages to all students that they are capable to pursue postsecondary opportunities. More resources and access to information for students prior to high school around the topic of college and career pathways will increase the likelihood of their success in high school and beyond.

### **Recommendations**

Investments in middle school college and career coaches, improved family engagement, and early commitment scholarships can ameliorate secondary and postsecondary opportunities for Latino students.

### **Investments in Middle School College-Going Culture via College and Career Coaches**

Middle schools will benefit tremendously from the creation of a college-going culture and establishment of an on-site College and Career Coach to work with them to emphasize the importance of planning ahead. College and Career Coaches would create awareness and preparedness in academics, social capital, and financial literacy. Within this capacity, these coaches can collaborate with school administrators on the implementation of school-wide college awareness/readiness curricula, providing students with academic and social enrichment activities such as mentorship, opportunities to visit college campuses, and signing-up eligible students for early commitment scholarships.

All students should have access to college prep curriculum to better equip them for postsecondary opportunity. Students’ grades, attendance rates, and levels of school engagement prior to high school directly impact their ability to complete high school and position them to be college and career ready. Increased investment in College and Career Counselors/Coaches in middle will benefit students tremendously. At the local level, districts can include these important roles in their school year budget—prioritizing schools with the highest needs.

Additionally, creating pathways for paraprofessionals to serve in the capacity of College and Career Coaches can provide an opportunity for schools to better serve Latino students, while providing paraprofessionals an opportunity to expand their impact in the classroom. Through amendments to Title 1 of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), paraprofessionals would be able to serve secondarily as college

and career coaches on-site, which they and the school receive incentives for their work. Subsequently, the Department of Education should expand on how they define the roles of paraprofessionals in schools “labeled” as Title 1 and mobilize access for all students.

As part of the new provisions of ESSA, schools can implement College and Career Awareness/ College-Going Culture as part of their strategic plan to improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged. Particularly after, Sec. 1002 (D, Prevention and Intervention Programs for youth who are “at-risk”), (H, Drop-Out Prevention), and (I, School Improvement) \*(cite Department of Education), a provision can include having paraprofessionals serve as college and career coaches as part of their goals in ensuring students meet the proficiency test expectations, English language proficiency, and graduation rate as part of their accountability plans to the Education Department. Paraprofessionals already have a lot of access to students. As such, they can easily teach students about college and career readiness through different points of contact—reading, writing, mathematics. Paraprofessionals are key folks in schools and should be provided with opportunities to have a participatory role in an important component of student learning and development.

### **Improved Family Engagement**

Improving the opportunities for Latino families to engage in the educational journey of their children allow them to become more involved and serve as advocates for their children. Part of the family engagement should be to familiarize parents with the U.S. education system—including postsecondary opportunities—and the college and career readiness preparation that takes place prior to high school. At a local level, school districts need see Latino parents as partners in raising student academic achievement, promoting persistence, and cultivating aspirations for opportunities beyond high school.

### **Early Commitment Scholarships: College for All Policy**

In Washington State, the Washington State Achievement Council (WSAC) partners up with a nonprofit organization, College Success Foundation, to administer the Washington State College Bound Scholarship (CBS). This initiative, established by the state legislature in 2007, seeks to alleviate the economic hurdles of college for low-income students by having students pledge to seek a postsecondary degree. This pledge students make in middle school transfers into scholarship money to cover tuition (at public college rates), some fees, and a small book allowance once they graduate from high school, enter a postsecondary institution, and meet the income requirement for the scholarship (Washington State Achievement Council, 2017). A component of this initiative is to encourage students to have high school plans, persist in high school, and aspire postsecondary opportunities—college or career. According to a study conducted by WSAC, 75% of the students who signed up for the CBS by their 8th grade year (2011) graduated from high school in 2015 (Washington State Achievement Council, 2017) Over 247,000 students in Washington State have applied for the College Bound Scholarship.

### **Conclusion**

K-8 grades are fundamental years in engaging young people to achieve academic success. In order for a college-going culture to be effective, all educators must send strong, consistent messages that every student is “college material.” When students have a positive outlook on school and are motivated to do well academically, they will be more likely to become college and career ready.

There is a need for federal, state and local policymakers to affect change by supporting all students to have access and support to readiness for college and career pathways. Policy implications for building college going culture in schools include investments in middle school outreach programs (increased investment in college and career counselors in middles schools),

increased family engagement, and early commitment scholarships. Federal and state grants aimed at providing access to information and resources to underserved and underrepresented young people create a lifelong impact, changing the trajectory of their lives and that of their families and future generations.

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