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Achieving the College Dream?

Examining Disparities in Access to College Information Among High Achieving and Non-High Achieving Latina Students

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Abstract: Using an Opportunity to Learn (OTL) framework, this study examines the college preparatory experiences of Latina high and non-high achievers at an urban Latina/o majority high school. Findings indicate that students relied almost exclusively on school resources to navigate their college preparation process. However, the school provided differential OTL based on class ranking and perceived eligibility for selective colleges.

Resumen: Usando el marco de una oportunidad para aprender (OTL), este estudio examina las experiencias de escuela preparatoria de estudiantes latinas asiduas y no asiduas de una preparatoria urbana con estudiantes latinos mayoritarios. Los hallazgos indican que las estudiantes se apoyan casi exclusivamente en los recursos de la escuela para navegar su proceso preparatorio universitario. Sin embargo, la escuela proporcionó una oportunidad para aprender (OTL) diferencial basada en el lugar ocupado en la clase y la elegibilidad percibida para universidades selectas.

Keywords: *urban Latina students; college access; college preparation; opportunity to learn; college counseling*

California has seen tremendous demographic shifts in its educational landscape. According to the California Department of Education (2006-2007), non-White students comprise approximately 68% of the P-12 public population, including 48% Latina/os, 11% Asian Pacific Americans, 8% African Americans, and 1% American Indians. Not only are Latina/o students the majority demographic in California's

P-12 public education system, but they are also expected to continue to increase in the foreseeable future (Orfield & Lee, 2007). These demographic changes have been accompanied by improved access to higher education for Latina/os: From 1991 to 2001, there was a 74% increase in the number of Latina/o undergraduates attending postsecondary institutions (Harvey & Anderson, 2005).

Although promising, this apparent consistency between increases in P-12 representation and participation in higher education for Latina/o students is somewhat misleading. Despite the increase in higher education participation, racial and ethnic disparities continue to exist in terms of college access. For example, many suggest that the growth seen in the number of Latina/o students entering college has been largely due to the number of students entering 2-year colleges (Martinez & Aguirre, 2002; Solórzano, Rivas, & Velez, 2005). Swail, Cabrera, Lee, and Williams's (2005) study of college-going Latina/o students uncovered that two thirds of these students were enrolled at community colleges with the remaining third at 4-year institutions. For White students, the trend was reversed; the majority of students were enrolled at 4-year as opposed to 2-year colleges.

These trends are indeed troubling and certainly cause for alarm. As P-12 education continues to become more diverse, higher education has not been able to capitalize on this growth across all of its institutional types, especially at 4-year highly selective institutions. This calls into question how equitable college preparation opportunities are for underrepresented groups, especially for Latina/o students, and points to the need to explore their college preparatory opportunities. California cannot fail in its attempt to improve college access for its largest and fastest growing minority group as the state's future economic and social stability relies on having a diverse educated population (Carnevale & Fry, 2000).

Given these demographic shifts and enduring disparities, this study explores college access at one urban, Latino/a majority high school and looks specifically at how college access for Latina students is mediated by student achievement levels. Exploring intraschool cleavages of college preparation and access may help us understand the micro-level dynamics regarding access for Latina/o students, especially for those who are not the highest achievers. We suggest that although not lacking in motivation and desire, the students in our study often have little understanding of the college application and preparation process outside of the information they are provided at their school. Unfortunately, the resources necessary to translate college goals into a reality are not equitably distributed further exacerbating the disparities between Latinas and their peers in college access. Findings from our study highlight the centrality of schools in increasing college preparation and access for Latina/o students while informing how we can better address the

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challenges that schools face in the college preparatory process through research, policy, and practice.

College Preparation and Access for Latina/o Students

Multiple barriers stand between Latina/o students and college entry. For example, the lack of adequate college counseling remains a persistent problem for many students throughout the country, especially at schools attended by low-income students of color. Nationwide, counselor to student ratios are on average 1:229 (California Educational Opportunity Report [CEOP], 2007). In California, that rate more than doubles to 1 counselor for every 556 students (CEOP, 2007) which well exceeds the recommended American School Counselor Association (ASCA) ratio of 1:250 (ASCA, 2008). Although counselor-to-student ratios remain high throughout all schools, research suggests that they might be highest at the low-resourced public schools that many Latina/o students attend (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). The lack of attention to this issue by both federal and state policymakers suggests that this problem will plague students in public school settings in the years to come.

High caseloads, combined with counselors' extensive responsibilities (e.g., discipline, high school course planning, and college access support), can affect the quality of counseling provided to students (Corwin et al., 2004; Perna, 2006). Inaccessible and low-quality counseling has the potential to further limit access to higher education for low-income and minority students as they are often the only formalized resource for information at their school. For example, counselors are often the key resource in providing information and processing fee waivers for standardized testing and college applications. Students who know of this information early enough to meet the deadlines can greatly benefit from these opportunities. However, if students do not know of this information or do not receive it in a timely manner, they may opt to forgo the college path because of perceived or real financial constraints.

Research also suggests that in large urban public school settings, where counselor-to-student ratios seem highest, counselors tend to focus their time and energies on either the highest achieving students or the most disruptive students. In Gonzalez, Stone, and Jovel's (2003) access study on Chicana social capital, they found that high-achieving students, in particular those in honors programs, felt that they were well attended to by their counselor. On the other hand, in their study on counselor guidance, Corwin et al. (2004) found that some counselors spent more time with disruptive students than those who were college bound. These studies suggest that to manage their time effectively, counselors often select (by choice or assignment) to hone in on a particular student demographic. Although having a focus may help counselors manage their time more effectively, it may come at the expense of other

equally deserving groups of students such as those in the lower ranges of academic achievement or nondisruptive students who might need more academic support.

In addition to dealing with inadequate counseling and college information, Latina/o students must also contend with deficit notions of their academic potential and college pathways. Historically deficit notions of Latina/o academic success (Valencia, 1997) and negative and deficient perceptions of intellectual ability based on race or ethnicity have permeated the minds of teachers and administrators. In education, these deficit notions have been documented in low academic expectations of Latina/o students such as being perceived as less academically able than White students or being pushed toward vocational education (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valencia, 2002). In addition, Rodriguez and Morrobel's (2004) study, which examines asset-based approaches with Latina/os within prominent research journals from 1996 to 2001, indicates that current research on Latina/o students continues to focus more on deficits than on assets.

These deficit notions are often translated into a lack of access to the most basic college preparatory resources. For example, low-income Latina/o students at urban low-income schools are less likely to receive timely and sufficient information about attending and financing college (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Luna De La Rosa, 2006; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2002; Vazquez, 1982). Latina/o students are also often counseled away from Advanced Placement courses or face additional barriers in accessing college preparatory courses as compared to their White and Asian American counterparts (Contreras, 2005; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; Zarate, 2006).

In addition to considering the influence of counseling and resource distribution on college participation, there may be gender differences in educational experiences that are often understudied (Gonzalez et al., 2003). Earlier research suggests that Latina students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in higher education (Vasquez, 1982). Furthermore, research illustrates that Latina students face additional hurdles in accessing college and college preparatory resources, especially as it relates to gendered expectations (Ceja, 2001; Vasquez, 1982). More recent research suggests that Latinas face additional barriers including the push to work to support their families (Gándara, 1995; Sy, 2006; Yosso, 2006). In addition, Tornatzky, Lee, Mejia, and Tarant's (2003) study suggests that many Latina students contend with increased familial pressure to stay close to home for college and often forgo living on campus. Furthermore, research indicates that Latinas are more likely to attend college and persist if they choose to delay marrying and having children (Cardoza, 1991). Despite these challenges to college access, it is important to recognize that successful college preparatory pathways are possible for Latina/o students and that there are students who are quite successful despite the aforementioned hurdles. Although we know that school conditions are far from ideal for Latina students, we know very little about the assets and resources students employ to counteract these resource limitations, especially in a Latina/o majority high school context. This study explores these

issues, enhancing our understanding of the challenges Latinas often face attending a predominantly Latina/o high school, specifically with college resource allocation based on perceived academic ability.

Conceptual Framework

An opportunity to learn (OTL) framework guides this study and illuminates contextual factors that may affect student access and achievement within and between schools. OTL was initially conceived by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) as a measurement tool to determine whether learning was a result of ability or learning differences (Schwartz, 1995). In 1992, the National Council on Education Standards and Testing recommended creating federal OTL standards to close the achievement gap (Schwartz, 1995). In 1994, OTL became a part of federal educational reform efforts as a voluntary set of standards for increased accountability (Goals 2000, 1994; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Shin, 1995).

Today, in an effort to determine equity in public schooling, an OTL framework is commonly used in P-12 policy research. Specifically, within the education policy literature, OTL is often used to identify linkages between school context (school tracking policies, teacher quality, etc.) and learning outcomes as a way of recognizing and assessing levels of educational inequality (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Moss, Pullin, Gee, Haertel, & Young, 2008; Wang, 1998). Although there is no universal definition for OTL, some common OTL indicators include students' access to qualified teachers, clean and safe facilities, up-to-date books and quality learning materials, and high quality coursework.

In examining college access, OTL is helpful in recognizing the importance of context to understand the ways in which college preparation occurs for students across all achievement levels (high and non-high achieving). In particular, this study will explore OTL indicators that can facilitate college access, which can include: college counseling, college recruitment information and contact, information about specialized precollege preparation programs (e.g., after school, summer programs), and information or workshops about college applications, or fee waivers, or financial aid. Because urban Latina/os are more likely to attend racially homogeneous schools, there is a need to examine access conditions in this context. Urban Latina/os are too often lumped together as one monolithic group overlooking intragroup dynamics such as gender and academic achievement. In this study, we are especially concerned with how Latina students with differing levels of high school achievement may experience OTL with regard to college preparation. Examining OTL across achievement levels may give us a deeper understanding of why Latina/o access to college remains so limited—especially for those who are not the highest achieving.

Method

To address limitations in the research literature, this study examines college access for Latina students at one urban, Latino/a majority high school and looks specifically at how college access is mediated by student achievement levels. In particular, this study examines if and in what ways schools provide access to college preparatory resources based on students' achievement levels. Exploring intraschool cleavages of college preparation and access may help us understand the micro-level dynamics of how access is promoted and inhibited for Latina students, especially those who are not high achievers.

The following questions guide our study:

What sources for college information do high achieving and non-high achieving Latina students utilize?

How does access to college information differ among high achieving and non-high achieving Latina students in a predominantly Latina/o high school?

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were collected as part of a broader research project established to examine the graduation and college-going rates of historically underrepresented students of color. The CHOICES Project utilized a multimethod approach to explore the academic experiences, college access, and educational support systems of underserved juniors and seniors. High schools were invited to participate in this study as a result of their relatively high graduation rates for African American and Latina/o students.

From September 2001 until June 2002, data were collected from 10 urban and suburban high schools located in the Los Angeles metropolitan area targeting schools having populations that consisted of at least 50% African American or Latina/o students. Qualitative and quantitative information were obtained from high school students, teachers, counselors, and parents to construct a more complete perspective of social and institutional challenges facing underrepresented college-bound students. In total, 496 students, 48 teachers, 31 counselors, and 51 parents completed surveys and participated in focus group discussions across all 10 participating high schools.

This study focuses on Latinas at Radcliffe High School (pseudonym), one of the 10 schools that participated in the CHOICES Project. All of the juniors and seniors at Radcliffe were invited to participate in this study. Participants completed a short survey and engaged in a 60-90 min focus group led by members of a research team made up of faculty and graduate students. Three separate focus groups based on student schedules were conducted. Twenty-one students participated in the focus groups, which included 1 Asian American male, 4 Latinos, and 16 Latinas. This study will focus on the 16 Latina students who participated in the focus groups.

Measures and Analyses

The multiple sources of data collected for this study represent a triangulated approach in an effort to assess the OTL factors directly related to student college preparation and achievement. Quantitative data were collected both at the school and individual levels. Broad data from the California Department of Education (California Basic Educational Data System [CBEDS], 2001-2002) were used to create a demographic profile of Radcliffe High School. In addition, the quantitative survey data from 14 of the 16 Latina participants were entered into SPSS to obtain basic descriptive data.

Qualitative data were obtained via student focus groups. Focus group interviews were conducted using a semistructured protocol, employing open-ended questions designed to assess students' perceptions regarding social expectations to attend college, availability of resources, sources of social support, and barriers to higher education. Students' narratives were coded using ATLAS.ti software. Particular themes were assigned to sections of the interviews to allow for organization, identification, and comparison. To analyze the data, pattern analysis (Yin, 1994) was used to identify major patterns within the findings. Interviews were analyzed by identifying major themes, and coding schemes were developed based on these themes as well as existing theory and literature on college preparation and access. Codes were used to organize data, and emerging themes were matched with predicted patterns based on past research and an OTL framework to identify consistencies and divergences from the literature.

Site Description

Radcliffe High School is located in a large metropolitan city in Southern California. The student population of Radcliffe High School reflects the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood with Latina/os making up 99% of its student body. With an enrollment of 5,073 students (CBEDS, 2001-2002), Radcliffe High School has one of the largest student populations in the United States and is considerably larger than the average U.S. high school student body of 795 students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003).

Overall, Radcliffe High School students face many challenges. Thirty-one percent of Radcliffe students are considered English Language Learners. Sixty-nine percent of Radcliffe students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, higher than 47% of students who are similarly eligible statewide (CBEDS, 2001-2002). Lastly, 17% of Radcliffe students receive CalWorks, a welfare program that assists families with household costs. In comparison, only 11% of students in California public schools are on this welfare program (CBEDS, 2001-2002).

Although Radcliffe offers a range of academic resources to its students, outcomes are mixed regarding high school graduation and college eligibility rates. Radcliffe students have high graduation rates but are slightly less likely than their peers to be eligible for college. Although the 4-year graduation rate for Radcliffe students was

73.4%, statewide the college eligibility rates for these students was 31.5%, slightly lower than the 35% overall eligibility rate for students in California (CBEDS, 2001-2002). Despite its substandard college-going rate compared with other California state high schools, it is important to note that compared with other Latina/o majority schools Radcliffe has a strong college-going rate. In addition to a teacher–student ratio of 1:21, Radcliffe has a counselor–student ratio of 1:725 which includes seven counselors, one of whom staffs the College Corner (CBEDS, 2001-2002).

Participant Description

Sixteen Latinas attending Radcliffe High School participated in this study. Fourteen of these students completed presurvey demographic questionnaires that assessed students' basic demographic data, grade point average (GPA), degree aspirations, family educational and socioeconomic background, and satisfaction with educational experiences and school resources. This sample description will be based on these responses. The mean GPA for these students was 2.86, with eight students having GPAs more than 3.0 and three of those students having GPAs of 3.30 or above. All students reporting a GPA of 3.0 or above and enrollment in college preparatory courses were considered high achievers for the purpose for this study. Thus within the parameters of this study, eight students in our sample were considered high achievers and eight were non-high achievers.

In terms of socioeconomic status, there was a fairly wide range in students' reported family income, from as much as US\$60,000–US\$69,000 a year to less than US\$6,000 yearly. Although in some parts of the country this mean income may provide for stable financial status, in Los Angeles a family of four requires an income of at least US\$40,000 to meet their basic needs (Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, 2007). Seventy-eight percent of participants indicated family incomes under this threshold of US\$40,000. The mean income for the Latinas in this sample was between US\$25,000 and US\$29,999 a year. Furthermore, the majority of students in this sample would be the first in their families to attend college when they reached their postsecondary goals. In addition, only two women (15.4%) had fathers with college experience and none had mothers who had attended college.

Findings

The findings of this study add a great deal to our understanding of Latina students' access to higher education. Students widely described their families as a source of encouragement and motivation; yet their lack of experiences with higher education limited parents' abilities to offer specific advice and college preparatory information. Although one might expect that high schools could offer the knowledge and support

families could not, students' narratives and survey responses indicated that their high school provided limited OTL and failed to address barriers to college. As a result of an overcrowded and underresourced school environment, students shared that they lacked individualized attention from teachers as well as basic educational resources. When OTL was assessed across multiple areas, including availability of educational materials, college information, and interaction with teachers and counselors, we found that students had limited access to these resources. Moreover, students' narratives revealed that the resources that were available were often restricted or channeled to the highest achieving students. Narratives revealed that rather than getting the college preparatory information and support they needed from Radcliffe Latina students used extracurricular programs to enhance their OTL and supplement the limited college preparation they received at their high school. However, it was again high achieving students who were primarily accessing these resources.

Family Support in the College Preparatory Process

Family and parents were a strong source of motivation in shaping students' college aspirations. Parents directly encouraged their children to continue their education often using stories of hardship as motivation. As one Latina student shared

When my dad was in Mexico, he said it was hard because . . . they were poor. And . . . he had to work and go to school and . . . when it came to doing homework all he had was a candle . . . because they didn't have light. . . . So he said it was hard and that I have the chance here, that I have light, that I have . . . everything and to take advantage of it.

In addition to fulfilling the dreams of their parents, students shared that they hoped to inspire their families. One participant stated

I'm the first one to go to college, I think, in my whole family. I have cousins that have graduated, but . . . none of them have gone to college. They just go and get jobs. So . . . I don't know how it's gonna be, but I'm gonna feel proud of myself 'cause . . . maybe . . . all the younger kids or family members . . . they'll look up to me . . . if I'm somewhat successful and then they'll see that you need to go to college.

Despite the support parents offered their children, their lack of formal educational experience in the United States also presented some barriers to the ways in which their daughters could access a college education. The survey data revealed that none of the participants used their parents as a source of college information revealing some of the parents' limitations based on their lack of educational experience. For example, at times students had to struggle with their parents' lack of understanding of the college application process. As one student shared

My parents, they kinda know because my sisters went to school. But I thought it would be easier for them. 'Cause when I was telling them all about my schools and where I had gotten into, they [said] . . . 'Oh, okay, that's cool.' But it wasn't a big deal . . . and I felt really bad because they don't know how hard I worked for it. . . . I guess they just expected that of me. But . . . I don't think they really know . . . everything that you have to do to get into those schools. . . . They just think it was easier than it is.

School Agents as the Center of College Information

Access to teachers and basic educational resources. Parents' lack of exposure to and experience with higher education limited the college information they could offer creating a need for schools to offer additional support to facilitate college access. The role of Radcliffe in college access is particularly important because surveys revealed that school agents were the most popular college resource for these Latina students. Thirty-three percent indicated using teachers and 27% revealed using counselors as their primary source of college information. Both high-achieving and non-high-achieving students revealed that many of the basic resources needed to support student learning were minimal at Radcliffe influencing the quality of their educational experience. Students described inadequate school materials and learning conditions as negatively affecting their preparation for college. Although students perceived teachers as doing their best, they described a dearth of basic teaching materials as mitigating the effectiveness of their teachers. As one student shared, "I think they [teachers] are [supportive], but they don't really have the materials to do it." This student goes on to describe a lack of sufficient textbooks in their classes. Other students also highlighted overcrowding as a detriment to their educational opportunities preventing them from obtaining personalized attention. One student shared

The classes are over-crowded. There's too many students. And teachers can't really concentrate on one student, help them out with what they really need. So the teachers do get a little stressed out 'cause there's too many students in the classroom.

In this overcrowded environment, students had little opportunity to personally connect with their instructors limiting the development of mentoring relationships with teachers that could have supported college access.

Access to counselors and college/career information. The counselor–student ratio at Radcliffe High School is one counselor for every 725 students, which is representative of the low numbers of counseling staff in California high schools more broadly. Specifically, there are seven academic counselors including one counselor who directs Radcliffe's College Corner. Overall, both high- and non-high-achieving students described counselors as being helpful, but in some cases, they served as an additional barrier to completing high school and becoming eligible for college. One student shared a very positive review of her counselor:

For example, my counselor, every time I needed something, I needed a recommendation letter or anything, like I have a question, I go to her and I ask her about it and she always give me a straight answer. She's helped me with [choosing] my [career] 'cause I was sort of confused in what career I wanted to be in and she was really helpful.

Another female student complemented counselors for their efforts to be supportive but at the same time pointed out a key mistake a counselor made, which had a negative influence on her college preparation process:

Well, I don't want to say that they're not okay. My counselor has been great to me, like he guided me throughout high school, like ever since I got here my 10th, 11th and 12th grade year he helped me out with my classes, what classes I'm gonna take. But there's been times when they give you the wrong information [and] you get the consequences, not them.

This student goes on to explain that she was told by her counselor that a drama class could be used to substitute an English class in graduation and California State University requirements. Because of this inaccurate information, she was going to have to enroll in adult school to make up the English course. As a result of the small numbers of counselors serving a large student body, it is possible that errors like this could result from the consequences of balancing competing priorities such as choosing to serve students instead of attending workshops on admissions.

College Corner: Top 10% Versus Others

Although students had somewhat consistent, although limited, access to counselors and teachers, access to the resources in the College Corner seemed to be especially restricted. Student narratives revealed that the top 10% of students at Radcliffe were well served by the College Corner, yet the other 90% of the student body had little access to its resources. For those in the top 10% of the class, utilizing the College Corner was a positive experience. A high achieving student shared

It's been positive actually because Miss [Connors] the one that runs the College Corner, she usually has meetings. . . . Students [who] are in a certain percentage of the class [meet]. . . . she gets meeting[s] for the top 10%. There's like representatives of colleges that go and talk to you and right there she gives you scholarships. And from Cal State L.A. too, there's a representative that helps me out a lot, too. So they really help me out.

In contrast, those who were not in the top 10% of the Radcliffe student body shared a very different experience. These students reported that they were prevented from accessing important college-related information. One student described a College Corner advisor denying students college application forms because of their academic ranking, “. . . for some of my friends . . . they wanted applications, but

they were denied applications because they weren't ranked [in the top 10%].” Another Latina explained how limited access to college preparatory resources extended beyond the College Corner, describing how there were only a few helpful resources for those who were not in the top 10% of students at the school in general,

The only people that are helpful are the representatives from Santa Monica [Community College] or Cal State L.A. . . . Those are the only people I go for. I don't go to them [the College Corner staff] because of the fact that they only pay attention to the top 10%.

In addition to divisions made by class ranking, help and resources were distributed based on their qualification for the different tiers of the California public higher education system. California's three-tiered system includes open enrollment 2-year community colleges, moderately selective California State Universities (CSU), and University of California (UC) institutions which are highly selective. Radcliffe students with a 3.0 GPA or above were considered UC bound and had access to resources to help them complete their applications and access these institutions. Those tracked into the CSU system or community colleges only had access to resources for their designated institutional types and were prevented from obtaining information about more selective schools. In addition, these policies seemed to discourage students' college goals to some extent. Moreover, as the following quotation indicates, some of the students who were placed in the CSU designation managed to access institutions in the UC system thus indicating the inaccuracy of this system of parceling students. One student stated

I don't think it's fair . . . I know for a fact that a lot of people were in the Cal States [designation] with me, and I know my other friends, they're going to UCs and they got put into the Cal State [track]. . . . I think that was a put down. . . . A lot of the students that were in there, I think they just got disillusioned too. . . . 'cause I know that a lot of my friends that could have gotten into UCs decided not to. . . . I know they [the counselors] put me down a lot, and I just got discouraged to do what I had to do.

This differentiation of students by their institutional eligibility is another dimension of the parceling out of resources that takes place at Radcliffe. Although the categorization of students, as both UC and non-UC bound and top 10% and bottom 90%, may be reflective of the school's limited resources, it essentially amounts to creaming the crop. Because of their lack of staff and college information, the College Corner has divided up their limited college resources, prioritizing those students who they see as having the most potential for college. Although this provides important opportunities for high achieving students, it limits the OTL for those who may be the most in need for support and information—those who have high aspirations to attend college but have not performed as well academically. Moreover, there is some indication that these

categorizations are inaccurate; although some students were placed into Radcliffe's CSU designation, they still gained access to the UC system. As a result, it is likely that there are many more Radcliffe students who, based on the limitations placed on them by the College Corner, were unjustly prevented from accessing their institutions of choice.

Supplementing College Information and OTL

To supplement the limited resources at Radcliffe High School, some students revealed that they accessed college preparatory programs offered outside of their school. These programs were an important source of information and support as students strived to attend college. They provided OTL across a range of areas related to college including financial aid workshops, college visits, standardized testing information, and college application workshops. One Latina shared

There's one program that I got in [during] the 11th grade called the TELACU Talent Search. And that program was a like a lifesaver because . . . when we're here [at Radcliffe], we never get to go to see any of the campuses in Northern California and they took us. . . . They let us have all kinds of workshops . . . like for financial aid. They were pushing us. They gave us fee waivers for . . . everything. It was so cool. And they were helping us throughout it all. And . . . they're still keeping track where you're going.

Another Latina echoed similar sentiments regarding a program she participated in:

Mine is . . . Upward Bound. . . . And it's good because it's a college-bound program. . . . Well, they work with us. . . . They help you. Especially at the end of . . . junior year and most of your senior [year], they helped out with the applications. They always made sure you had the resources for SAT's. They give you free waivers for ACT's and stuff. They give you classes during the summer . . . and take us out to field trips to look at campuses.

The opportunities to obtain information about college applications, required standardized tests, and financial aid filled important gaps in students' knowledge. As first generation college students, they needed information about the application process that neither their parents nor their school was able to provide. Moreover, financial aid information further expanded their opportunities, helping them to find ways to address the financial challenges of attending college. It is important to note, however, that although these opportunities were not exclusively discussed by students in the top 10% of their class, the students who described their experiences in these organizations were predominantly high achievers. Students who were not the highest achieving did not mention outreach activities at all implying that they did not have access to this additional source of college information.

Discussion

The findings of this study have much to add to our understanding of the forces that come together to influence the college preparation and choice process for Latina/o students broadly and Latinas more specifically. It is critical to address the issue of Latina/o student access as an issue of social justice and equity as well as a necessity for economic stability, especially as the Latina/o student population grows throughout the United States. Over the past four decades, Latina/o public school enrollment has grown 380% from 2 million in 1968 to 7.6 million in 2005 (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Although western states such as California, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and Nevada have historically had the largest Latina/o public school enrollments, these demographic changes continue to emerge nationwide and many new states (Georgia & Maryland) and school districts nationwide are scrambling to adapt to and be inclusive of Latina/o students (Delgado-Romero, Matthews, & Paisley, 2007; Orfield & Lee, 2007). Thus although this study focuses on the experiences of 16 Latinas at a public high school in California, growth of the Latina/o population nationwide makes the findings of this study relevant on a larger scale as schools across the country aim to support and promote college access for their Latina/o students.

First, it is important to acknowledge that although supportive, parents and families were not able to offer students complete and comprehensive support throughout the entire college process. Latina/o immigrant parents often have college aspirations for their children; however, they historically come from less formally educated backgrounds and have little understanding of the college application and financial aid system in the United States (Haro, 2004; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Torrez, 2004). This research is consistent with the parents in our sample. In addition, our findings illuminate the need for increased parental information and opportunity for involvement in ways that are both informative and attentive to Latina/o parents' unique needs (Ceja, 2004) such as helping parents through the process as a group and having honest discussions about barriers to access and providing strategies to overcome such obstacles (Auerbach, 2004).

The findings of this project provide much for teachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers to consider as they work toward promoting access for Latina/o students. In spite of limited college resources, there was a college counselor, College Corner, and campus visits from college representatives that were available to support students' college preparation process. Based on students' narratives, these resources were not distributed equally, which results in OTL that differ greatly within schools.

When discussing the influence of their high school environment on their college preparatory process, attention was not necessarily focused on the lack of school resources. Rather, many students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with how school resources were distributed. Our findings suggest that institutional practices channeled college preparatory resources to the highest achieving. Although

these practices allowed for the highest achievers to maximize their school's college preparatory resources, they did so at the cost of those who were non-high achievers. Some students were able to supplement their college knowledge by participating in outreach programs that offered additional OTL. Yet we must acknowledge that there was not equal access to these programs either; high achieving students tended to report their participation in these programs, whereas non-high achievers did not.

The findings of this study call into question the ways in which educational resources are currently distributed within schools. Regardless of academic ability, all students deserve opportunities to receive college information and counseling regarding their full range of postsecondary options. In Radcliffe's current system, however, the majority of the resources were focused on the top 10%. Focusing on these students offers greater certainty of success, but does nothing to close the gap between Radcliffe's high graduation rates (83%) and the relatively low percentage of students eligible to attend a 4-year college in California (32%).

Implications and Recommendations

Like their high achieving peers, motivated students at Radcliffe without near-perfect academic records deserve opportunities to learn and engage in an educational process that will prepare them to take the next step. Otherwise, students who seek the opportunity to attend college may not receive adequate information or resources to transform their college plans into reality. As administrators and policymakers consider ways to increase the numbers of Latina/o students attending college to facilitate meaningful social change and cultivate an educated populace to support economic growth, we urge them to do the hard work of implementing institutional structures and policies to facilitate access for a wide range of students not simply assisting the students who are most likely to succeed. For example, at Radcliffe, the College Corner could utilize a peer counseling program or community volunteers to supplement their small college counseling staff and have this program focus on providing college information to non-high achievers. High schools can also leverage the support of their alumni who are enrolled in college asking them to talk with students during college vacations or establish e-mail relationships to offer advice and guidance on admissions and financial aid.

Although most college counseling offices are highly understaffed (CEOP, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008), counselors must find ways to be attentive to all students' needs regardless of their achievement level. At Radcliffe, this could be accomplished within existing resources by having counselors specialize in working with students by achievement level. This is not to further concentrate resources to the highest achieving. Rather, these measures would ensure that counseling resources are more equitably distributed across all achievement levels.

Moreover, because of the broader context of school districts, state governments and higher education communities also influence access to school counseling (Perna

et al., 2008), it is important that government and districts prioritize funding for counseling services. Additional support and resources are necessary to truly meet students' diverse needs and inform them about their postsecondary and career options. In addition to gaining more support from within the K-12 educational system, higher education institutions must also seek out opportunities to collaborate with schools around college preparatory opportunities. For example, students who are not UC or CSU eligible, but express interest in attending college, could be invited to a special session on community colleges and how to transfer to a 4-year institution, led by community college representatives or admissions officers who work with transfer students. Leveraging relationships with administrators at postsecondary institutions could certainly strengthen ties between K-12 and higher education facilitating access and smoothing the transition for students in need of support and advice.

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