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Mentoring Affirmations and Interventions

A Bridge to Graduate School for Latina/o Students

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Abstract: Using individual interviews, this study examined how a group of Latina/o undergraduate students in Texas considered graduate studies. Findings reveal that familial support, perceived community responsibility, and their participation in a mentoring program all played a considerable role in demystifying graduate studies. Implications support the notion that mentoring relationships can effectively create a bridge towards graduate education for underrepresented student populations.

Resumen: Usando entrevistas individuales este estudio examinó como un grupo de estudiantes latinos de pregrado en Texas consideraba estudios graduados. Los hallazgos revelan que apoyo familiar, responsabilidad comunitaria percibida, y su participación en un programa de guía jugaron un papel considerable para quitar mitos sobre estudios graduados. Implicaciones apoyan la noción de que las relaciones de consejería pueden efectivamente crear un puente hacia la educación graduada de poblaciones de estudiantes de poca representación.

Keywords: *Latino/Hispanic Americans; undergraduate education; mentoring; graduate education*

Studies by educational scholars reveal that college enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-old Whites was 38.7%, compared with 21.7% for Latina/o students at the turn of the century. Given the alarming low rates of Latina/o students who enroll and successfully complete undergraduate degrees, it is not surprising to find their enrollment rates in graduate programs remain much lower. In 2004, the percentage of total graduate and first-professional enrollment for White students in degree-granting institutions was 65.5%, whereas Hispanics comprised only 5.8% of enrolled

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students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006).

In this study, we investigate how a group of Latina/o college students participating in a university mentoring program consider graduate studies. We apply the definition of mentoring put forth by Moore and Amey (1988):

A form of professional socialization whereby a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as a guide, role model, teacher and patron of a less experienced (often younger) protégé. (as cited in Jacobi, 1991, p. 507).

Our shared desire to empower underrepresented groups and our own participation in the mentoring program shaped this study. VL participated in the mentoring program during her senior year in college and LP served as her graduate student mentor. With LP's guidance, VL conducted a research project in preparation for graduate studies. The findings from that research project are presented here.

Purpose

The problem of how university administrators and faculty can attract, sustain, and graduate more students from historically underrepresented populations is furthered by the following research question: *How do the lived experiences and participation in a pregraduate school mentoring program inform Latina/o undergraduate students' consideration of graduate studies?* Analysis suggests that Latina/o students participating in the mentoring program draw on their lived experiences as raced and classed individuals as they consider furthering their educational aspirations. A responsibility to themselves, their families, and communities informs their commitment to pursue graduate studies. The following review of literature highlights the importance of mentoring experiences for undergraduate students and the value of graduate student mentors.

Literature Review

Scholars divide the functions of mentoring broadly into two types of support: (a) instrumental or career and (b) psychosocial support (Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Jacobi, 1991). According to Ensher and Murphy (1997), instrumental support provides career enhancement and mentor sponsorship, whereas psychosocial support consists of counseling and friendship that may "enhance a protégé's sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in a role" (p. 61). Mentored undergraduate students report benefiting from stronger self-esteem and academic self-efficacy, greater overall satisfaction with their academic program, better psychological health, higher

career goals, and reduced stress and role conflict (Ferrari, 2004). Compared with their nonmentored peers, mentored students also show increased retention and graduation rates, higher grade point averages, more academic units completed per semester, increased marketable, discipline-based skills, behaviors, and attitudes as well as greater social and emotional interactions between faculty and students (Crawford, Suárez-Balcazar, Reich, Figert, & Nyden, 1996).

Several scholars note the value of graduate mentors for undergraduate students. Crawford et al. (1996) describe that graduate students can serve as effective, if not more effective, mentors for college students than faculty members because they are generally closer in age and generational status and may be more sensitive to the challenges facing current undergraduate students. Graduate students are themselves engaged in mentoring relationships with one or more faculty advisors and highly value these interactions as well as the benefits associated with this practice—role modeling, guidance, support, advice, and attention—enabling them to act as valuable mentors to undergraduate students (Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006). Mentoring undergraduate students presents graduate student with the opportunity to develop their teaching and advising skills in ways a traditional graduate program may not offer. As mentors, graduate students may also benefit from career enhancement and personal satisfaction (Ensher & Murphy, 1997).

The literature above serves as a foundation for this study by establishing the positive effects of academic mentoring and the benefits of graduate student mentors. Our study seeks to address the gap in literature examining the academic mentoring experiences of Latina/o college students as they consider graduate studies.

Theoretical Framework

The literature on mentoring reviewed above, Yosso's (2005, 2006) community cultural wealth model and our personal experiences in the mentoring program inform our approach to this study. The community cultural wealth model informs how we examine the experiences and perspectives of the participants via an outline of the following six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant (Yosso, 2006). For the purpose of our study, we discuss two of these forms of capital: aspirational and resistant capital.

Method

Designed with a qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), this study used semistructured interviews to collect data and examine the experiences of four Latina/o undergraduate students in a mentoring program.

Data Source and Analysis

The undergraduate students volunteered to participate in video- and audio-taped, open-ended, semistructured interviews. Data was collected in May 2006, at the conclusion of the semester-long mentoring program. Interviews averaged 1 hour in length and were transcribed verbatim. In the process of analysis, a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Riessman, 1993) was employed, and substantive themes were deduced and outlined from the data. Two phases of data analysis were performed: (a) vertical analysis (each interview was analyzed individually, line for line, and for the overall story) and (b) horizontal analysis (analysis was conducted across interviews for similarities and differences; Thompson, 2000).

The informants include two female and two male undergraduate students who were all paired with female graduate student mentors. Three of the informants self-identify as Mexican American. The fourth identifies as Latina and Salvadorian American. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

The students participated in the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Pre-Graduate School Internship program, a university-wide program at the University of Texas at Austin established in 2003. As part of the portfolio of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE), the IE program focuses on increasing the diversity of students pursuing graduate degrees. When interviewed on May 30, 2007, the director of the program reported that 45% of undergraduate participants were first-generation college students and/or belonged to an underrepresented minority group; specifically 25% to 30% were Hispanic (Anderson, 2008; Cherwitz, 2005; R. Cherwitz, personal communication, May 30, 2007, Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium, Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate School Internship). Program participants engage in a mentoring relationship with a graduate student and a supervising faculty member. In partnership with their mentor, mentees identify their specific objectives, activities, and goals for the semester. Possible activities include attending academic conferences, researching graduate programs, and/or contributing to their graduate student mentor's research. Prior research notes that mentoring programs should afford the opportunity to individualize the mentoring experience and roles because mentee needs and expectations as well as mentor resources, vary greatly (Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy & Sánchez, 2006; Haring, 1999). These findings align with the structure of the IE program. Mentees attend monthly meetings with the program coordinators and are required to submit written reflections. The mentoring program offers unique opportunities to learn the tacit, sometimes intimidating, culture of the academy, and encourages undergraduate students to discover how their commitment to community can be fulfilled through their academic pursuits.

Results

The aim of our study was to identify the motivations and perspectives of Latina/o undergraduate students as they consider graduate studies. The following findings portray the narratives of the participants via their own voices. In doing so, we highlight their experiences and perspectives as important sources that inform their consideration of graduate studies. Central to the four stories is the role of community cultural wealth as a means to overcome educational hardships. Their stories are detailed within two overarching themes derived from the data analysis: (a) the need to further their educational aspirations as a community responsibility and (b) the role of mentoring in considering and demystifying graduate studies.

Overcoming Educational Challenges Through Cultural Wealth

The only inheritance they [my parents] can leave me is not money; the only inheritance they can leave me with is [an] education.

In her work on the Chicana/o educational pipeline, Yosso (2006) describes various forms of capital that describe the cultural wealth Latina/o parents provide their children. In the above quote, Claudia alludes to aspirational cultural wealth, “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of barriers” (p. 41). Through the value placed on education, Claudia’s parents, like the parents of other Latina/o students, encouraged her to succeed academically.

Claudia is a self-described independent young woman born in Houston, Texas, in 1983 to immigrant parents who lived in economic poverty in their native country of El Salvador. She self-identifies as a Latina and Salvadorian American, as well as a first-generation college student. Her father attended public school in El Salvador through the second grade and her mother through the ninth grade. Claudia describes facing challenges when asking for help with her schoolwork at home, “. . . it was difficult because it [our home language] was just Spanish, and I was coming home with English homework.” Although Claudia’s parents were denied the right to further their formal education, they provide her with aspirational capital that influenced her intellectual endeavors.

She [Claudia’s mother] would always tell me, “I should have been a psychologist.” In talking to my mom and then coming here [to college], I got more interested in the subject.

Claudia’s initial interest in psychology was fostered in the home.

Roberto was born in New Braunfels, Texas, in 1982 and self-identifies as both Mexican and Mexican American. Neither of his parents had the opportunity to pursue beyond an elementary education; he is the first in his family to graduate from college. Although Roberto shares that his mother “hasn’t been able to be the kind of parent who can help you on your homework all the time. She couldn’t help me with

career choices. She couldn't help me pick what I wanted to do," he still recognizes her guidance as the "solid foundation" or aspirational capital that supports his academic success.

When I was little she would help me sew costumes for little plays and was always there, front row, at all my concerts and All-State Concerts, all the marching band competitions. In the mornings, she was making me breakfast and wishing me good luck. She has always been the person who has been right behind me.

Roberto's mom not only nourished his body by the meals she prepared for him daily, but she also fueled his *ganás* and drive to succeed in school.

As a gay Latino, Roberto describes how his mother's ongoing acceptance of him after his "coming-out" experience served to further motivate his pursuit of his education goals.

Whoever I was, as long as I was happy and as long as I was doing something that I loved, that was all she [mother] cared about. Having that kind of support and that kind of love, it helped me push forward. It gives you someone to want to be better for, someone to succeed for.

Roberto drew on his mother's unending love as a source of motivation.

Carlos was born in 1985, in San Antonio, Texas. He identifies as Mexican American and like Claudia and Roberto he is also a first-generation college student. After becoming a single mother at the age of 19, Carlos' mom was unable to pursue a college education. However, as she but overcame barriers associated with being a single mother, she encouraged his career exploration. Carlos' mother remains supportive of whatever career choice he makes. Her flexible aspirations allowed Carlos to develop his passion for theatre and film as early as in elementary school. Among other career goals, Carlos hopes to direct award-winning films and theatre productions that will "make the world overall a better place". He attributes this belief in himself to his mother's encouragement.

Angela is from Austin, Texas, and was born in 1984. She identifies as Mexican American and unlike the three other informants, her father completed a graduate degree and her mother a GED. Like the other participants, Angela also finds inspiration to pursue higher education in her parents' struggle.

My dad overcame very, very difficult circumstances and humble beginnings to complete grad school. My mother has limited English skills, but her high expectations and her own love of learning supported my day-to-day schooling growing up.

Her parent's persistence in the face of struggle, like that of many Latinas/os in the United States speaks to a sense of determination that inspires Angela. Aspirational capital, transmitted by loving parents enables the students in this study to pursue

their educational goals in the face of adversity. A second type of cultural wealth, resistant capital, enables the students to skillfully counter this adversity.

Yosso (2006) defines resistant capital as the “knowledges and skills cultivated through behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 49). The four mentees in this study access resistant capital to overcome educational challenges. Hailing from a low-resourced school district, Claudia counters cynicism from others by more passionately pursuing a higher education.

A lot of people were saying, “You guys can’t make it from the school you came from”. And then when I go back it’s like, “Wow, I did it!” . . . I think it just motivated me to do it [graduate college] even more.

Roberto drew on his inherited resistant capital to combat inequality in school. As the only “Mexican” and one of the few students from lower-socioeconomic status in his advanced placement classes and in the top 10% of his graduation class, Roberto recalls feeling “excluded from the general culture” and self-conscious when ridiculed based on physical characteristics, “my big lips.” Equipped with resistant capital, Roberto defiantly states, “It [ridicule] never stopped me from being better; in fact it pushed me to be better which I was. I always fought against being marginalized, so I’ve always persevered and pushed forward.” Roberto also shares an experience that exemplifies how Latino parents model resistant capital to their children when faced with discrimination. At a local bank, Roberto’s mother was denied service at a teller because of her need for Spanish-language assistance. Rather than accept the treatment, Roberto’s mother made a report to a supervisor and received a formal apology from the teller. Analyzing the “awful” incident through a critical race lens, Roberto is able to transform the event into resistant capital.

Carlos speaks pointedly about the discriminatory practices he observed in educational institutions in his former town, including lack of “resources for our students to take college preparatory courses or any other advanced courses that might be helpful to us”. He furthers, “. . . one of the local universities is discriminatory against my school district. They only accept 10% of Latino/Hispanic students in a city that has 60% Latino or Hispanic.”

Like Roberto above, Angela cites an example of how her mother modeled resistant capital when confronted with a situation that involved Angela’s sister being denied enrollment in a higher track in school based on a teacher’s opinion. Angela describes that “through [my mother’s] advocacy . . . my sister was placed in the more challenging track and did very well. My mother would not stand for someone defining our limits.” Angela shares that her mother’s “boldness and self-assuredness, in spite of what others might have perceived as a language deficiency” helps to build her own self-confidence.

Carlos, Claudia, Roberto, and Angela emerge from similar socioeconomic and ethnic/cultural backgrounds. They share experiences that draw on Yosso’s community

cultural wealth model, including aspirational and resistant capital as provided by supportive families. Through these avenues students overcome challenges to pursue higher education and contribute to their communities.

Furthering Educational Aspirations as a Community Responsibility

A primary goal of the IE mentoring program is to provide opportunities for students to discover how their education can fulfill both their intellectual interests and desire to help their communities. All four participants express a strong commitment to use their educational training to effect positive change in their home communities. Their commitment to others is commonly expressed through the phrases, “I need to do something,” and “I need to be a voice.” The goal of the mentoring program thus supports their values and practices.

Claudia has a desire to be a voice for those in her “Mexicano, Salvadorian immigrant community” via an elected political position and wishes to concentrate on higher education and immigration issues. Roberto aligns his desire to “change the world” with his work in theatre and performance. A particular experience as part of a theatre tour exposed Roberto to school inequities and inspires him to be a voice for marginalized students.

You are just creating a system where these students aren’t able to succeed. I think that is something to speak out against. There has to be a voice for them [students], and so if I don’t do it, who else is going to do it?

He is also motivated to expand the positive images available to Latina/o youth.

I realized the importance of myself as a performing body of color to be that role model that people can look up to so they say, “Hey, I can be of color and be significant. I don’t have to adhere to the standard norms.

Carlos, Roberto, and Angela discuss their commitment to community may also be satisfied through teaching either in public school, community college, or at the university level. Carlos’s desire to teach is fueled by the discriminatory practices he witnessed at the high school he attended. He hopes to encourage students to pursue college, and “put the *education* back into the classes” instead of maintaining a discipline focus. Roberto identifies the need for more diversity among faculty and through a connection made in the IE program obtained a collegiate-level teaching assistant position. Angela’s decision to pursue an advanced degree in education and focus on issues pertaining to Mexican Americans is informed by a sense of duty to help students from similar backgrounds. The students desire to contribute towards change in their community by furthering their education is fostered by their cultural wealth and participation in the IE mentoring program.

The Role of Mentoring in Considering Graduate Studies

Prior to entering the mentoring program, all four students had daunting perceptions about graduate school experience. Having participated in a mentoring relationship, the students in this study report gaining the following benefits: expanded social networks, better overall preparation for graduate school, and a greater sense of self-empowerment.

Building Networks

All students comment that overcoming the barriers of networking with faculty and graduate students helped them make important connections on their path to graduate school. Bordes and Arredondo (2005) find that positive interactions between undergraduates and faculty in mentoring relationships may promote a more positive perception of the university. In addition to making new connections, Claudia overcame the feeling that, “. . . some people aren’t too approachable.” Roberto believes the IE program provides underserved students with “. . . the connections that are so hard to get and so intimidating to get.” Carlos also reports meeting graduate students and faculty members that serve as “very important people” in helping him consider graduate studies. Through her mentor’s contacts, Angela met faculty members and graduate students in her field of interest, which “. . . opened doors for me that I did not know existed or felt too intimidated to approach.”

Demystifying Graduate School

As a result of the mentoring program, the four participants gained a better understanding of the effort involved in graduate study and benefited from a guided process of researching graduate programs. Claudia is thankful her mentor exposes her to the “ins and outs” of social psychology, enabling her to thoughtfully reflect, “Is this really what I want to do? Is this how many hours I am going to be doing?” Roberto can now identify that he values graduate programs that “accommodate my cultural interests or cultivate my heritage.” He is also better informed of the commitment necessary to persist as a graduate student.

Graduate school is a big investment . . . you can’t run into [it] haphazardly like with the flexibility of undergraduate studies. In graduate school it’s very specific; it’s very honed. You’re basically preparing yourself to be a professional in a specific field.

Carlos understands that a master’s degree can provide him with specialized training and the resources to support his career goals. He credits that his mentor was, “extremely available, made a lot of time, and did a lot of work” to help him research prospective graduate programs. Angela is more knowledgeable about the rigors and

rewards of graduate student life, “I was able to witness how my mentor’s hard work and efforts paid off. It was motivating to me and my fears about grad school were lessened.” Under her mentor’s guidance, she is gaining “a broad understanding of the different paths I can take within the field.”

Self-Empowering Experiences

Three participants comment on the process of self-empowerment they underwent during the mentoring program. Astin’s work (as cited in Jacobi, 1991, p. 523) attributes the level of college students’ involvement in their own educational process as important determinants of academic achievement, satisfaction with the college experience, and likelihood of continuing their education. Santos and Reigadas (2002) state, “a quality faculty-student mentoring relationship is likely to engender positive self-perceptions in at-risk students as well as feelings of self-efficacy, personal control, respect for oneself, and a sense of being valued and respected by significant others” (p. 42). Through participation in her mentor’s research projects, Claudia is inspired by the academic freedom available to graduate students, “there are so many things you can do just with your thoughts, your ideas. I would want to make my own project and research.”

The mentoring experience helps Roberto grow as an intellectual and he now views academia as a “viable profession” within his reach.

[The program experience] starts putting responsibility on the student and once one realizes that one has the responsibility, and one can take action for oneself, then everything else just comes and you realize, “Oh, I can do this research, and I should do it, and I’m going to do it.”

Angela’s mentoring relationship pushes her to “find my own voice and gain confidence in my ideas and opinions.” The program enables Angela to diminish her intimidation and more easily envision herself as a graduate student.

The mentees recognized several ways the mentoring program demystified graduate school by encouraging them to expand their networks, become more informed about graduate school, and take more ownership over their education.

Student Recommendations for Mentoring Initiatives

Although all four participants recommend the program to their peers, the students offer recommendations for university-mentoring programs that reveal the needs and concerns of many Latina/o and first-generation college students interested in pursuing graduate studies. The four mentees expressed they had initial doubts about their ability to participate in the program because of their academic and work obligations,

but the IE program's flexibility in scheduling mentor-mentee meetings, methods of communication, and the level of relationship building encouraged their participation in the program. Students propose that other mentoring programs foster a greater sense of community and diversity among participants by organizing multiple small group meetings to encourage personal interaction, but also provide opportunities to meet as a large group to expose mentees to diverse perspectives. The students' suggestions demonstrate the needs and desire many Latina/o undergraduate students feel for personalized experiences during their college experience and the high value placed on programs that emphasize relationship building and personal interaction.

Implications and Conclusion

Findings from this study reveal that the IE Pre-Graduate School program at the University of Texas at Austin successfully supports first-generation college students and students of color as they consider, and research studies. The participants in this study share common lived experiences in terms of accessing community cultural wealth but also share an intimidation and lack of awareness of graduate education. Students report gaining experiences that demystified graduate study in such a way that empowered them to connect higher education with their desires to serve their communities. Benefits of participating in the mentoring program as reported by the students include: (a) expanding their networks of faculty and graduate students, (b) a guided process of conceptualizing graduate studies, and (c) a process of increased self-empowerment.

As the cultural diversity of the United States increases so does the need to identify, recruit, and retain students in graduate programs who can identify, highlight, and address our global society's needs and contributions. Because the university environment is designed to meet the needs of mainstream youth, ethnic minority students may not possess the prior experiences or information necessary to well-prepare them for integration into the university environment. Thus, this study documents that the IE Pre-Graduate School program provides an effective model of academic mentoring for Latina/o and first-generation college students.

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