

Latino college students' transition experience high school to college.
Dr. Raquel Michel
34th Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience
Dallas, TX
February 10, 2015

Purpose

The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to explore the social preparedness and familial support experiences of first-year, first-generation, low-income Latino college students' during their transition from an urban charter high school to regional urban public universities in Southern California. Towards this end, this study address's the following research questions (1) What are the social experiences of first-year, first-generation, low-income Latino college students as they transition from an urban charter high school to regional urban public universities in Southern California? (2) How do first-year, first-generation, low-income Latino college students experience familial support as they transition from an urban charter high school to regional urban public universities in Southern California?

Social capital theory was used to guide the development and analysis of this study. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as providing access to resources and building networks with groups of people. When building relationships, people can have access to others' networks of people and their resources, which can open up the door to an array of opportunities. In essence, building networks may assist students in their preparation to attend regional urban public universities.

Methods and Data Source

This study utilized an ethnographic case study design to facilitate descriptions and interpretations of a cultural group within a bounded system (Creswell, 1996, p. 58; Creswell, 1996, p. 61). I used a criterion strategy for my study that set requirements to select the site and the student participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The site's criteria included that the school needed to be a charter school in an urban setting. I also used a chain- or network-sampling strategy, which occurs when participants identify and refer others with similar characteristics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The criterion strategy allowed me to recruit students eligible to participate in the study by collaborating with the school counselor. The chain or network strategy also allowed me to recruit parents who participated in the study.

In total I interviewed five participants for the early transition interview during the summer after their high school graduation and prior to their fall college enrollment. The participants included 2 male Latinos, and 3 female Latinas; 4 participants are of Mexican descent, and 1 of Salvadoran decent. In between the summer and fall, one participant dropped from the study, a female of Mexican descent. I then subsequently interviewed and observed four of these students at their respective universities during the fall in order to gather information about their social experiences and familial support during their transition. In addition, I interviewed three parents of the participants during the fall to ascertain the type of support they gave their children during their transition to a university. Lastly, I analyzed data by creating domains, in conjunction with social capital theory, which helped create a taxonomy of detailed codes and in turn helped define cultural terms.

Results

The findings in this study point to social capital as being imperative to students' transition from a charter high school to a university. Communication was the first step in establishing social capital during students' transition to college. In this study, the teachers and counselors were able to distribute technical college-going information and resources, however students would have preferred for their counselors and teachers to have shared information related to life and college experiences on campus. In addition, they would have also appreciated information regarding the importance of establishing communication with new college peers and professors as an integral part of transitioning to college. Some students foresaw communicating with peers, and when they began college they established communication with college peers with whom they shared similarities. Likewise, other students foresaw having limited communication with college professors, but once they were on campus, they attempted to communicate with their professors to gain clarity and understanding on coursework. Classroom interaction also helped establish communication with new peers and professors.

Lastly, college services, programs, and organizations communicated with students through mailings and recruitment events. However, in terms of communicating official information, these students found that university websites were difficult to navigate because they were not user-friendly.

In addition to communication among their social networks, relationships helped to establish strong social capital for students during their transition from a charter high school to their respective universities. Once students established communication with stakeholders such as their high school teachers and counselors, they were able to establish and maintain these relationships. Students explained that they trusted them with personal experiences and academic support. Even after students graduated high school, they expected to ask their former high school counselors and teachers for help once they began college.

Additionally, students maintained ties with their close friends throughout high school and college. However, students considered their new college peers as acquaintances rather than close friends because their relationships were fairly new. There was a limited amount of relationship building with professors, despite a high level of communication.

Lastly, familial support was essential for students during their transition. Familial social capital helped provide encouragement from parents, siblings, and extended family members. Parents of the students expressed how proud they were of their son/daughter to be attending higher education. Extended family members also provided academic support, while parents provided encouragement and motivation. However, family members connected the length of a college course with less workload rigor. In one instance, social capital led family members in another country to provide money for college tuition. While at times the immediate parents provided limited financial support, social capital within families provided a united front in an effort to help students succeed in college.

Significance

Many participants expressed that they benefited from a college-going culture at their high school, however they felt that they needed more specific college transition information that captured the day-to-day nature of campus life. The level of communication from teachers and counselors would not change, however the type of information disseminated would provide additional campus details. In addition to college transition information, another recommendation would be to strengthen ties between the charter high schools and universities to help create a curriculum that would address the social challenges that students face.

This curriculum would help continue positive communication between teachers, counselors, and students and include basic information about deadlines, definitions, requirements, majors and careers, resources, programs, and organizations at most colleges and universities. Some of the students indicated that they would have liked to be part of introductory courses or programs that acquainted them to their campus because they would have been able to navigate their campus a little easier as the first in their family to attend college. In addition, the recommended curriculum would help build communication and relationships between charter high schools and universities.

One way to strengthen this relationship would be to develop a quarterly professional development meeting between the two entities that would incorporate speakers from financial aid, admissions, health services, and other support services to discuss the expectations of the students as they exit high school and enter college. A student panel of both high school seniors and first year college freshman could also be helpful where students discuss the intricacies of their proposed or established transition to college.

Lastly, the partnership between charter schools and universities should result in college information for students' families. The ultimate goal here is to assist charter schools and universities to properly disseminate information to low-income, first-generation, college-bound Latino students ahead of their transition to college to better ensure their retention and graduation.

Raquel Michel

E-mail: rmichel319@yahoo.com

Phone: (323) 810-9901