Road to college filled with distinctive barriers for Mexican-Americans

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Research targets why so few actually reach and complete higher education

Mexican-American high-schoolers and their white peers aspire equally to go on to college to chase their dreams, but the minority students see many more hurdles in their paths, say researchers at the University of Oregon.

The findings â€” when added to previous research in the field of social-cognitive career theory that looks at the relationship among interests, aspirations and outcomes â€” raise an important question, said lead author Ellen Hawley McWhirter, a professor of counseling psychology in the UO College of Education. "What are we going to do as a society to dismantle those barriers so that they can achieve their goals and make the contributions they want to give to our communities?"

The new study, published in the February issue of the quarterly Journal of Career Assessment, focused intently on 28 potential barriers to higher education as perceived through the minds of 436 Mexican-American and white students in the Southwest and Midwest. McWhirter began studying such barriers in 1991 while she was a doctoral student in counseling psychology in Arizona. This time, McWhirter and colleagues focused on subgroups of the previously identified barriers in an effort to find particular trouble spots. They also considered the possible role of parent education and the students' perceptions of their own abilities to overcome the roadblocks they anticipated.

"The most striking findings were the degree to which the Mexican-Americans not only anticipated that they were more likely to encounter barriers, but that these would be more difficult to overcome," McWhirter said.

The barriers included internal factors (lack of confidence and fear of not fitting in), relational barriers (pressure or lack of support from friends or teachers), preparation and motivation to pursue college, and the prospect of having to leave behind their friends and family.

A driving force for McWhirter's research can be found in figures available from the National Center for Education Statistics. Only 10 percent of Latinos in the United States receive a college degree, even though more of them are attending college than ever before, compared to 18 percent of blacks and 34 percent of whites. College graduates earn an average 77 percent more than high school graduates, but fewer Latinos attain that pay level.

"In spite of strong family values for education, Latino students have among the highest dropout rates," McWhirter said. "Latino parents have aspirations for their children that are as high as or higher than white

parents do. So what's going on here?"

"There are very real barriers associated with socioeconomic factors, racism and school quality that many Mexican-American students encounter," she said. "This study focuses on student perceptions to better understand how these contextual factors influence what they themselves anticipate. According to social cognitive career theory, those who perceive more barriers will be less likely to turn their career interests into goals, and their goals into outcomes."

Findings also showed that girls, both Mexican-American and white, viewed financing higher education as a bigger barrier than did boys. Surprisingly, McWhirter said, boys and girls â€” not just the girls â€” were equally likely to foresee such barriers as pregnancies or sex discrimination.

Another unexpected finding was that the education level of parents was unrelated to students' perception of barriers. While students of higher educated parents were more likely to plan to attend four-year colleges, they did not anticipate fewer barriers. "This finding," McWhirter and colleagues wrote, "rules out the possibility that parental education would account for some of the large ethnic group differences in perceived barriers that we've identified in previous research."

The co-authors suggest that future research and interventions that target perceived barriers should consider the influence of supports on postsecondary plans, as well as the transition from high school to college. This includes understanding how schools can maximize and incorporate parental influences on students' career development. "In the current study," they wrote, "there were clear ethnic differences in the perceived likelihood of encountering and difficulty overcoming barriers associated with the support of significant others."

"We know that Mexican-Americans families often are characterized by close ties, resilience, a strong work ethic, interdependence and support," McWhirter said. "We know that parents are wonderful resources, but sometimes they lack familiarity with the school system to guide their children through preparing for higher education. For example, they may not know how to help their kids prepare for college entrance exams or apply for scholarships. As educators, we also need to do more outreach to Latino parents and families, making our educational systems more accessible, and being more collaborative in our vocational planning efforts."

Co-authors of the study were Danielle M. Torres, a counseling psychology graduate of UO who now is a professor of school counseling at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore., and Susana Salgado and Marina Valdez, who are current UO doctoral students in counseling psychology.

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