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# First Generation College Parents: Bridging the Gap Between the American Higher Education System and Latino Families

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First Generation College Parents:  
Bridging the Gap Between the American Higher Education System and Latino Families

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This paper, in conjunction to an Applied Project presentation, was completed for the advancement in completing a Masters in Leadership Studies with an emphasis in Education Policy.

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the gap that exists between the American higher education system and the families of Latino first-generation college students. Research conducted for this paper details the many barriers immigrant Latino families encounter when navigating the American education system, as well as how parent involvement is key to student success no matter where the student is in their educational career. Furthermore, this paper offers a possible solution to closing that gap by implementing a program that would mentor and support the parents of first-generation college students through the transition from high school and up until students graduate from college. The goal of this program will be to turn community members into community leaders, creating relationships amongst not only Latino parents but amongst students, families, and professionals.

*Keywords:* First-generation, parents, American higher education system, mentorship

## Preface

Education has always been something extremely important to me and very near and dear to my heart. I come from a two-parent household, where my mother had a high level of education having completed her Master's degree in Mexico, while my father dropped out of school by third grade because he was working in the fields throughout his youth. Being the first-born daughter of two hard-working and resilient Mexican immigrants, I am proud of my culture and understand the struggle my parents faced to set up a life for our family in a country that was so foreign to them. In high school, I was part of a college readiness program that encouraged me to pursue higher education by providing tutoring, college tours, and informational meetings. However, though this program allowed me to become more knowledgeable about higher education, my parents knew very little about anything that had to do with life after high school. When I let my parents know that I wanted to go to college and that I was hoping to attend a university two hours away from home, I immediately received push back and questions of all sorts. Where will you live? How will you pay for dorms? How much does that cost? What?! Does financial aid even give you that much?! Will it be safe? Why do you want leave us?! Aren't all schools the same? Don't they all give the same classes? Why can't you just go to that school twenty minutes away? What if something happens to you and you are two hours away!? *¡Ya te crees muy grande, verdad! Si te vas, no pienses en regresar.* After a whole afternoon of discussing my college options, I agreed to apply to only two universities that were not near where I lived and a couple near home, ultimately deciding to attend the closest university to ease my parents' anxiety over the unknown that is the American higher education system.

Amongst speaking to friends, who also happened to be first-generation college students, this anxiety amongst our parents was one thing we all had in common. Many of my high school

friends, most having attending the same college readiness program as me, started college but did not finish. My personal experience and the experience of the community I grew up in has really pushed me to think about what really is causing this anxiety within, what I like to call, first-generation college parents. Throughout my research and after conducting multiple interviews within my community, I came to the conclusion that there is a greater disconnect than expected between immigrant Latino families and the American higher education system. Parents believe that college is beneficial and they want their children to go to college, but the fear of the unknown gets in the way of them fully supporting, encouraging, and guiding their first-generation college students.

## First-Generation College Parents:

### Bridging the Gap Between the American Higher Education System and Latino Families

#### **Introduction and Background**

The challenge I am hoping to help address is the lack of connection between colleges/universities and parents of first-generation college students, especially focusing on Latino immigrant families. American universities are something that is so foreign to Latino immigrant families because, one: they do not understand the American educational system and, two: the main language used at American universities is not a language they fully dominate. There is a lot of focus on first-generation college students, which is definitely necessary, but the parents of these students go through many emotions of their own because their child is doing something they did not do in a country they do not know very much about. Educating parents about how the college/university system works will then benefit the parents' emotional well-being, and this will trickle down to their children who wish to pursue and continue into higher education.

After further analyzing my strengths and passion, it has come to my attention that I would like to predominantly serve the Latino community by providing a program that not only educates parents about the American higher education system, but also immerses them in experiences and provides opportunities for parents to become leaders amongst their own community. Because I can connect to this community culturally and linguistically, I can possibly build more solid relationships with the participants, especially if they know that I have gone through exactly what their child is about to go through. This program will target first-generation college parents, specifically Latino immigrant families. There are many programs that target first-generation college students but many times those programs only provide very basic and short-term

resources for the parents of these students. They present the idea of college but build no lasting or genuine connection between the families and college.

### **Purpose**

Parent involvement in their children's education is crucial throughout the entire academic journey. In other words, if students see that their parents are apathetic towards education, that same sentiment can be transmitted onto the student, therefore affecting their academic career (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). One can see how the feeling of apathy mixed with distress regarding a child pursuing higher education can impact the student's desire to continue on after high school. As I did some research, I came across very little already written about the parents' viewpoint or feelings about their child leaving to college. There are numerous sources that list beneficial factors influencing a first-generation student's academic success in college, and amongst these parental support was frequently listed. Consequently, college is an important time in a young adult's life, where they explore career paths, build lasting friendships, and learn about themselves. It is not like high school, where teachers or parents dictate day-to-day life.

According to Lohfink and Paulsen (2005), first-generation college students were less likely to continue past the first couple of years of higher education when compared to students who were not first-generation. This means that first-generation college students are less likely to graduate from college if they cannot persist through it. Similarly, a report done by Redford and Hoyer (2017) at the U.S Department of Education compared first-generation college students' achievement in college versus the achievements of students who came from families with at least one parent who had attained a postsecondary education certificate, and it came to light that first-generation college students were less likely to take college entry exams and were also less likely to have expectations or plans for continuing onto higher education. If students are not taking

college entrance exams or, more importantly, lack a plan pertaining to pursuing higher education, especially if that is what they hope to do, then their chances of attending college, or even graduating from college, become slim.

Parents play an essential role in helping their children acquire the proper resources to go to college. After conducting various interviews in the community I grew up in, it became apparent that parents do not know what they do not know. In other words, they do not know what information they should know in order to help their children pursue higher education if that is what the student intends to do. These interviews shed a clear light on how much parents want to help but the barriers, which include language differences and access to information, restrict them from doing so. Therefore, this goes to prove that understanding and helping parents navigate college with their child can be beneficial for all stakeholders. It is important to address this issue because the college completion rate for first-generation college students is significantly lower than that of their counterparts. Also, it tends to take first-generation students longer to graduate than their counterparts. Similarly, this issue is also important because of the emotional effect it may have on the parent, especially when looking at immigrant families. They are in a country where they do not dominate the main language, do not understand the education system, let alone the higher education system, and now their child is moving away to be a part of something that is so unknown to them. As an elementary school teacher, I see how much parental support can affect a student's success and I believe that to be true all the way from pre-school and well into higher education.

### **Literature Review**

Migrating to a new country poses barriers that many are willing to work against in order to achieve the "American Dream." The dream of a better education that leads to a door of more



opportunities is a dream many Latino immigrant families hold. This dream, however, is followed by a harsh reality. A reality that encompasses the notion that the American educational system, more specifically the American higher education system, is a foreign and frustrating system for Latino immigrant families due to the lack of understanding of the system that is complicated by the lack of communication and connection between American systems and Latino immigrant families.

### **Parent Involvement**

The importance of parent involvement is a widespread idea emphasized by the American educational system. A child's academic success can be partly credited to parent involvement. According to Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), parent involvement, behavior, and attitude towards a child's education affects the student's motivation in school. Highlighting their perceived idea of parent-child and child-parent pathways as being a form of a feedback loop, attitudes and behaviors towards the child's schooling affects the child's motivation (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Consequently, the child's academic involvement may also push parent involvement. With this information, one is able to understand the general idea to which parent involvement in a child's education is a determining factor to the academic success of their child. However, the information lacking in this study is specificity to ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Thus, we can use this information to uphold and stress the idea that parent involvement is crucial for the academic success of a child but also further elaborate in this applied project how certain barriers prohibit this feedback loop from flowing smoothly. These barriers are imposed on both the students as well as the parents' abilities to support their children when pursuing secondary education.

Likewise, as noted in the work by Hill and Torres (2010), the problem is not centered on the lack of parent involvement by Latino families, yet instead lies in the disconnect Latino families have with the American educational system. This paradox encompasses the notion that education is highly valued in Latino families but the academic achievement of U.S Latino students is still suffering (Hill & Torres, 2010). Arguing that the values, goals, and worldviews of Latino parents and American schools are at a disconnect, the economic struggles, low English proficiency, and cultural misunderstandings are main disadvantages Latino families face formulating the discussed paradox (Hill & Torres, 2010). Although mention of parent involvement in school provided programs, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences are discussed and criticized, this work lacks mention of supplemental resource programs, such as TRiO programs, that are specifically geared towards the support of low-income, minority, first-generation students. With this said, taking the ideas mentioned in this article which focus primarily on k-12 education, we can apply them to the disconnect felt amongst Latino families in secondary education. Taking the cultural disconnect students feel into account, we can analyze how this barrier also affects the parents, to which parents who already have an even less clear understanding of the American educational system are faced with a greater disconnect, enhancing the restraint Latino families have in fully involving themselves in their child's education.

### **Parent Support via Programs**

Further elaborating on the unfamiliarity Latino parents have with American schooling, Villalba, Gonzalez, Hines, Henderson, and Borders (2014) not only address the importance of parent involvement in educational success but also discuss the lack of familiarity Latino families face within the U.S educational system, including post high school graduation options. This

project created LaP-LAC (Latino Parents-Learning About College) groups to help parents with high-school aged children understand high school expectations and college options. Although this work provided great insight to how psychoeducational groups are used to build off of social learning and how that can be effective in helping Latino families understand the American educational system, the study lacks information regarding its effectiveness for both the child and parent once in college. However, taking the idea that effective engagement and understanding within the group studied is attributed to having a group of similar peers with cultural congruence, we can take this and extend it to the task of the Leader-Member Exchange theory, or LMX leadership approach for this project. Having individuals of similar backgrounds undergoing and having gone through having a first-generation child in college working together will provide a base of comfort and support for Latino families who are familiarizing themselves with the US education system.

Similarly to the previous two works, Downs, Martin, Fossum, Martinez, Solorio, and Martinez (2008) also present a career and college knowledge program intended to increase Latino enrollment and family involvement in higher education. This program follows closely the purpose for this applied project to which they take community members and turn them into community leaders. Creating relationships amongst not only Latino parents but amongst the students, families, and professionals, this study portrays positive results. With this study providing a detailed list of suggestions for future programs, this article will serve as a key component to the construction of our own Leader-Member Exchange approach. Given that our focus will be primarily on Latino immigrant families, with the joint knowledge presented from all sources, there are high hopes in addressing the problem of American university systems being

foreign to Latino immigrant families by breaking down the miscommunication and unfamiliarity barriers.

### **Design**

Again, my goal is to create a program that will help address the gap that exists between parents of first-generation college students and institutions of higher education by invoking a level of community leadership mirroring a Leader- Member Exchange combined with Servant Leadership model. There are three questions I will focus on that will guide the creation and implementation of this program that will help address the challenge. These questions are:

1. What emotions do parents feel when their child, as a first-generation college student, prepares for and enters into higher education?
2. How do those feelings impact the parents' capacity to support their child and how does this affect the student's success?
3. What scaffolds can my program put into place to help ease the transition from high school to college for parents?

### **Community Scan via Interviews**

In order to answer these questions to then address the challenge, I will conduct a brief survey amongst the community that I grew up in. This community constantly faces the challenge I am addressing. I have interviewed ten families, a total of twelve parents, in my hometown community about the doubts and hidden feelings they have about their children going off to college. Each of these parents are Latino immigrants that have or have had at least one student go to college, and none of these parents have pursued any form of higher education in the United States themselves.

In a conversation style interview, I asked each parent the following questions:

*a. ¿Qué tan seguro se siente acerca de ayudar a su hijo/a a navegar el sistema educativo estadounidense?*

*b. ¿Siente que tiene las habilidades o los conocimientos necesarios para apoyar a su estudiante en la universidad ahora?*

*c. ¿Qué importancia cree que tiene para usted, como padre, estar bien informado sobre la educación y la experiencia universitaria de su hijo/a?*

*d. ¿Cuánto le hubiera ayudado conocer a otro padre que lo hubiera podido apoyar en esta experiencia como mentor?*

*e. ¿Qué apoyos le hubiera gustado tener cuando su hijo/a estaba aplicando y preparándose para ingresar a la universidad?*

a. How confident do you feel about helping your child navigate through the American educational system?

b. Do you feel like you have the skills or knowledge necessary to support your student in college now?

c. How important do you think it is for you as a parent to be knowledgeable about your child's college education and experience?

d. How much would it have helped if there were another parent who helped you through this experience as a mentor?

e. What supports do you wish you had when your child was applying and leaving to college?

As one can see, I do not directly ask about emotions and feeling concerning these parents' children leaving to college to avoid creating discomfort for these parents. Instead, I have formulated these questions mindfully, hoping that emotion comes through in the conversations I

have with each parent. Surprisingly so, every parent mentioned in one way or another an emotion they felt regarding higher education in this country.

### Results

To reemphasize, one of the most common responses in these interviews was *“no se lo que tengo que saber para apoyar a mis hijos”*. Parents do not know what they need to know in order to support their child continue onto and through higher education. Relating to question “a.” about confidence in knowing how to support your child, all twelve parents admitted that they did not feel confident about helping their child and seven parents said they left this role up to the high school or supplemental programs, such as TRiO Upward Bound, hoping that these outside resources could help in some way. Question “b.” was once again answered unanimously as all parents admitted to not feeling as if they are much more informed now than they were when their children were barely entering college. Six parents said they relied or will rely on their eldest child to help the younger siblings with all things related to college because they believed those older siblings knew more than the parents. One mother commented on how they were glad their child was in a TRiO Upward Bound program and how she appreciated the support this program gave her child but admitted to feeling like the support she was given as a parent was very minimal. She was frustrated that, when going to informational meetings provided by the school or outside programs, she would leave as confused as she arrived because she did not understand the terminology they were using, even if the meetings were held in her native language. It seems that these meetings would overload parents on information regarding higher education but parents are having a hard time synthesizing this information since their overall understanding of the American educational system is minimal.

Question “c.” shed the most light on the challenge I am trying to address. For question

“c.”, every parent responded very similarly, saying that they believe it is highly important for parents to be knowledgeable about college education and experience. Eight parents, all mothers, commented on how “in the dark” they felt regarding how their children were doing in college. They commented about feeling a sense of impotence because they do not know if their child is passing classes, eating well, or making healthy choices on campus. Out of those eight mothers, five spoke about how they don’t just feel a disconnect with the college, but also with their children who attend college. They portrayed a sense of pride with a tad of embarrassment because their children are now becoming more educated than them, leading their children to rely on outside resources that do not include the parents. These five mothers felt as if they couldn’t help their child, so their child turned to other people or organizations for that help. Two of these mothers mentioned their concern regarding their children distancing from their Latino culture and family, and one mother actually told me a story regarding how her child told her she didn’t feel like speaking about college with her because the child thought she could never understand. All parents commented on how they feel like the colleges themselves do not help when it comes to becoming more connected to campus life. One parent said they understood that their children are adults now and they deserve some privacy, but on the other hand that he wants to make sure he knows how to support his child, other than financially, while they are going through college to make sure they graduate from college.

Question “d.” and “e.” helped me come up with certain characteristics I would like my program to have in order to successfully address the gap existing between Latino immigrant families and institutions of higher education in America. All parents claimed they could have benefitted if there was someone they could trust enough to mentor them through the process of transitioning from high school into higher education along with their child. Four of the parents

said that they actually had to rely on family members or friends of the family to help them answer questions regarding what they specifically needed to know about college in order to help their child with the transition. As previously mentioned, many parents relied on their eldest child to help the younger siblings with the process of getting ready for, applying, and getting into college. In a way, their children were serving as academic mentors for the younger children in the family, but no one was there to mentor the parent. For question “e.” many parents replied with similar thoughts regarding what they would see as most the beneficial supports to help them help their child. The most popular response was having information accessible in languages other than English, with nine parents giving this answer. The second most popular answer was knowing information necessary before it was too late. In other words, parents wanted to know what they could do to better support their students prepare for college, such as what classes and tests they should take in high school or what would increase their chances of getting into the school they wanted. If parents can become informed early on in their children’s academic career, then these parents will have stronger foundational knowledge about higher education as their children navigate through high school, and therefore will be more confident with the transition into and through college.

### **Program Implementation**

Having gathered tremendous information after conducting interviews, I came to realize how huge the disconnect is between American institutions of higher education and immigrant Latino families, especially parents. Parents want their children go to college and want to help their children be successful in doing so, but many barriers get in the way of them being able to do this, thus possibly impacting first-generation college students’ success. Therefore, my program will help bridge the gap by providing 1) mentors for the first-generation college parents,



2) explicit resources in Spanish, and 3) college simulations and experiences so parents can better understand what their child might experience in college.

Hypothetically, if this program were to be funded and implemented, it would have the following characteristics. To start off, participants can enroll into the program when their child is in high school, and will be supported throughout their child's high school and college career. Also, this program would run along in congruence to college readiness programs already provided to high school students, like TRiO Upward Bound, since many colleges offer these partnerships. This program will help bridge the disconnect between Latino immigrant parents and institutions of higher education by focusing on three major components.

### **Distribution of Information**

First, the program will provide information in the parents' primary language and in vocabulary they will understand, by people who are trained in delivering clear and explicit information and who have gone through the process the program participants are going through now. This information will be presented in many modes, with visuals, handouts, videos, and discussion opportunities. Every session will focus on one major concept, such as A-G requirements and how the students can ensure they enroll in these courses during high school. We will not bombard parents with information every session, but rather leave ample time for questions revolving around the topics discussed each session.

### **College Experiences**

Next, parents will engage in college experiences with and apart from their children. Most of these experiences will take place on the weekends to provide parents who work during the week opportunities to participate. There will be summer events provided in congruence with programs that conduct summer long programs for the students. For example, if a student is in a

program that has a six-week on-campus summer session with a TRiO program, the parents will be invited to partake in activities similar to those their children will be partaking in, as a sort of college simulation. They will take mock college classes and attend college events, as if they were college students. These college classes will be on something they need to know about college. They will receive syllabi and lectures from actual professors and have a “class schedule” they would have to follow for the days they are immersed in the college experience. They will attend events on campus, organized by diverse students groups.

### **Mentorship**

Finally, the most important aspect of my program would be the mentorship component. I would have parent mentors who have gone through this program already or who have children who graduated from college. These mentor parents would be the community connection the “aspiring” college parents will have. They will be along for the journey providing the moral support and will act as “leaders” using the Leader- Member Exchange in conjunction to the Servant Leadership. These parents will speak the program participants’ native language and receive training on how to be a good mentor, how to set boundaries with program participants, and what tasks they will be taking on. Mentors will also be equipped with knowledge and information about college and college readiness program participants may have. Most importantly, these mentors are parents who can empathize with the program participants because they themselves have been in their shoes.

### **Leadership in the Program**

In order for the mentorship aspect to grow and become a solid aspect of this program, I will focus on mix of the Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership model. According to Mullen and Lick (1999), mentorship can empower and inspire participants to reach the unifying

goal, which in this case will be getting their children into and through college. Since this I intend to have parents who already had children go through college be the mentors in my program, I can create a sort of cycle that would help increase the quality and accessibility to my program. Once parents have “graduated” from my program when their child has graduated from college, they can now become mentors for the incoming group of participants. Having gone through this program themselves, these parent mentors will become invaluable fountains of knowledge and more easily empathize with their mentees. Mentorship will provide the opportunity for both the mentor and mentee to grow as individuals by allowing the mentor to give back to their community by interacting with someone who is going through what they recently went through, while the mentee has someone to rely on for knowledge, information, and assurance.

### **Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

I will focus on certain aspects of this theory to ensure the highest quality of mentorship in my program. The Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory is a relationship-based approach to leadership that focuses on the two-way relationship between leaders and followers. It suggests that leaders develop an exchange with each of their subordinates, and that the quality of these leader–member exchange relationships influences subordinates' responsibility, decisions, and access to resources and performance (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015). Relationships are based on trust and respect and are often emotional relationships that extend beyond the scope of employment. Leader–member exchange may promote positive employment experiences and augment organizational effectiveness (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015).

### **Servant Leadership**

On the other hand, servant leadership can be better described as the opposite of what we know traditional leadership to be. Instead of one person at the top over seeing everything, the

leader is “in the trenches” with the rest of the followers. According to Poon (2006), servant leaders must work along side with the followers, and be followers themselves. They must understand and empathize with their subordinates, and truly care about what they think, feel, believe, and experience (Poon, 2006). The leader has to genuinely like what s/he is doing, as the followers will feel that energy and thrive.

### **Mentorship using Leader-Member Exchange and Servant Leadership**

The biggest key to being a successful parent leader and mentor in my program would be the ability to empathize with the participants. Mentors would understand that “it takes a village”, and are willing to give back to the community they are a part of. These parent mentors embody the previously described leadership models, and the program will do its part in training every new parent mentor, as the coordinators of the program will also embody these qualities. Mentors and mentees will build a relationship as the years progress and become those “family friends” many parents go to for resources and knowledge pertaining to college. Examples tasks that the mentors would take on include accompanying mentees on college tours, connecting mentees to outside resources for further advice, and even sharing experiences or life hacks related to students transitioning from high school to college. These parents will not only be seen as leaders in the program, but also leaders and change-makers in their community.

### **Future Considerations**

Because of the nature of my survey and initial goal for my research, I came across a couple of items I could not fully address with the making of my program. It came to my attention that some parents were concerned that their children were losing touch with their culture and family because they are looking beyond their parents for resources and support when transitioning to college. Parents were distraught at the idea that their child is seeking support

from outside organizations, telling parents they didn't want to share news about their college experience because they didn't think parents would understand, therefore distancing themselves from their parents. Further research can be done regarding possible loss of family identity within first-generation college students when they attend college.

Also, interviewing prospective first-generation college students about the lack of connection there is between their families and institutions of higher education would have been beneficial in understanding what other scaffolds my program could provide. Due to time constraints, parent interviews were seen as most prominent for my intent but I believe there is also high value in the voice of first-generation college students and where they stand on this issue.

### **Conclusion**

My personal leadership philosophy, and who I am as a leader in my workplace, community, social groups, and family impacted the research, design, and implementation of this program. Every single human being, no matter their language, culture, age, or life experiences, has the capability to lead, just as they have the ability to be productive and impactful followers. The Latino community in the U.S is so culturally rich and resilient. Education is important in the Latino community here in the America, and over the years, millions of immigrant and first-generation families have found a way to make it in this country, through hardships, racism, prejudice, and barriers of all sorts. At the end of the day, parents do what they can for their children, and facing an intricate education system is another challenge they have to knock down, many times blindly and fearfully, to ensure future generations have a better quality of life. This program will offer resources and cultivate the leadership skills Latino parents already have to help them confidently guide their children towards, into, and through college.

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