The Faculty Advisor's Role in Helping Mexican-American Students Succeed in Higher Education

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Abstract

Mexican-Americans account for nearly one-third of all Latinos in the U.S. About 10% of Latinos complete four years of college compared to nearly 40% of Anglo-Americans. One way to increase the percent of college graduates within this group is to increase retention rates of those enrolled in colleges. Academic advising is a key component in this process. This article examines characteristics of less acculturated Mexican-American families so as to enhance the cultural sensitivity of faculty advisors. Specific suggestions on how to improve the advising process are also offered.

Introduction

Mexican-Americans are estimated to account for nearly one third of all Latino's in the U.S., yet they remain greatly underrepresented in higher education (Baron, 1991). Only about 30% of recent Latino high school graduates enrolled in college. This percentage has remained relatively constant for the past several decades. Among Latino's, 10% of males and 12% of females complete four years of college, compared to 38% male and 42% female Anglo-Americans who complete college (Baron, 1991). As a consequence, there is a pressing need to develop approaches designed to not only recruit, but to increase graduation rates for Latinos in general and Mexican-Americans in particular. This need is particularly important in Colleges of Agriculture throughout the United States as many are enjoying increasing numbers of Latinos enrolling in their majors.

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One facet of academe that can address this need for greater retention of Latinos in the college student population is advising. Faculty advisors play a critical role in improving the likelihood of student success in college. Their impact is even more enhanced if they are sufficiently aware of the needs of their advisees. A key area to consider when developing advising approaches with Latino college students is the student's level of acculturation. Acculturation is described as a process whereby ethnic minorities learn, incorporate, and integrate characteristics of the dominant culture into their lifestyles (Valdes, et al, 1987). This process involves specific cognitive, affective and behavioral change. Students typically go through three stages as they embrace the acculturation process: (a) cultural resistance (students attempt to remain separate from the dominant culture) (b) cultural shift (students begin integrating dominant cultural characteristics into their lives) and (c) cultural incorporation (students begin to feel a level of comfort in both the original culture and the dominant one)

As with other ethnic subcultures in America, traditional Mexican-American students are confronted with the challenge of acculturation as they encounter mainstream America's traditions and values. While many make the transition smoothly, some find conflicts between their traditions and American norms. For example, as Mexican-Americans acculturate, problems with disengagement and feelings of disloyalty toward their extended family system can emerge. The purpose of this article is to (1) discuss some characteristics of less acculturated, Mexican-American families so that faculty advisors will gain insight into this group of students and (2) suggest culturally sensitive strategies for working with these students.

Characteristics of Traditional Mexican-Americans

Mexican-Americans have typically organized themselves

around an extended kin network (Mindel, 1980; Ramirez, 1980). Father, mother and children often live with, or in close proximity to, a wide array of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Others from outside the family may be "adopted" as God-parents and God-children during religious rights of Baptism, Confirmation or Marriage. These "compadres" or "comadres" are also considered part of the extended kin network (Keefe, et al, 1978). Family values tend to stress family interdependence. Cohesiveness predominates and a strong sense of nurturance, affiliation and cooperation is valued. Self-sacrifice in the interest of love and family unity is promoted (Levine & Padilla, 1980; Ho, 1987).

In the traditional Mexican-American family, both father and mother are involved in the parenting role (Diaz-Guerrero, 1975). Older males often appear to be given more respect, power and authority than other family members. The father is considered the family head with the oldest male taking over in his absence. While the father has a strong instrumental role in providing and protecting the family, the mother also shares in the family power structure through the expressive role of nurturing and otherwise caring for the family's physical needs. It should be noted that the mother often has just as much or more actual power in decision making and family functioning as the father. This is because she tends to be the parent most directly involved in the daily decisions affecting the family. Yet the father is, at least figuratively, the family head.

The term "machismo" is ascribed to the male role. The stereotypical myth of "machismo" describes the male as a dominant, almost tyrannical figure in the home, who expects women to defer to him. In reality, machismo is quite different in traditional families. It connotes the provider/protector role of the male (Ramirez, 1979). The machismo role requires that the husband be the protective provider in the family. As a consequence, the husband/father is perceived as authoritative in the eyes of the family since they typically look to him first for many of the answers to coping with the world outside the family system. In the traditional Mexican-American family, machismo does not usually have the connotation of the stoic, domineering, authoritarian that seems to pervade the minds of mainstream Americans. The word machismo literally means gallant, courteous, charitable and courageous, yet the typical connotation of machismo has come to represent chauvinism in the worst sense (Ruiz, 1977). This erroneous connotation may result in both Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans mistakenly believing that Mexican-Americans condone and/or encourage male brutality and insensitivity toward women (Baron, 1991).

"Marianismo" is the female counterpart term for machismo in males. "Marianismo" refers to the responsibilities and power of the female in the family hierarchy (Soto-Fulp & DelCampo, 1994). The traditional, non-assimilated Mexican-American family generally holds rigid male and female gender roles and defines the female role as nurturer, life-giver and self-sacrificer. The wife is empowered in the family by her giving love and nurturance.

Parent-child relations are often given greater importance than the husband-wife relationship. Individuals are encouraged to turn to the relatives in their extended family first for all kinds of aid including emotional, financial and practical needs. Females, in particular are encouraged to remain close to each other. Mother-daughter, sister-sister ties are lifelong and do not necessarily diminish following marriage. Siblings are also encouraged to take responsibility for each other. As a result, children, especially daughters, may be overprotected because brothers, older sisters, aunts, cousins, etc. "look after" them in the same manner as parents would.

In light of the above discussion, it would not be surprising if a Mexican-American student displayed considerable reticence to ask an advisor for help and guidance with college problems. The student would more likely turn to someone trusted within the college peer group or the family for information. Additionally, it would be equally difficult for a non-acculturated student to go to the university counseling center if the student were experiencing psychological problems. Again, family and trusted friends are the first places to which the student would likely turn for help and guidance.

A student's level of acculturation should be assessed early in the college career since it could impact the need for the advisor to make modifications from traditional counseling approaches to more culturally sensitive techniques. It can be difficult to accurately assess acculturation levels merely by interacting with students in the advising capacity. However, there are certain cues that an advisor might look for that could offer some general insights in this domain. These cues include what language the student prefers to speak (i.e. English or Spanish), the ethnicity of most of the student's friends, music preferences (i.e. Latino music vs. mainstream popular music), food preferences, and place of birth of the student and the student's parents. There are several reliable and valid instruments in the research literature that measure levels of acculturation. One that is particularly good because it specifically measures the level of acculturation of Mexican-Americans is the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans (Cuellar, Harris and Jasso, 1980). Examining scales such as this one could provide the advisor with additional ideas for informally assessing acculturation.

Less acculturated students may adopt a greater degree of social distance from the advisor and be less apt to speak openly about issues and problems that may be

troublesome. This is often done in deference to the status of the professor. Thus the student may feel inadequate in the advisor's presence. An advisor therefore, should be particularly sensitive to subtle cues the advisee may give during an advising session. Picking up on these cues and initiating conversation to show an understanding of the student's value orientation would be helpful. It could help in the short term to solve the problem at hand and in the long term to move the student along the acculturation continuum. As a result, the student would feel accepted by the advisor and could potentially look to him or her as a role model.

Acculturation Problems of Mexican-American Students

Traditional Mexican-Americans, with their emphasis on family cohesiveness, may encounter problems as they attempt to assimilate into mainstream America. The process of acculturating often stresses traditional Mexican-Americans beyond their normal ability to cope (Falicov, 1983; Jalali, 1988). For example, in the American nuclear family, independence from the extended family is typical. As Mexican-Americans attempt to embrace this norm, children may come to feel an inordinate sense of guilt in moving away from the extended family and simultaneously, a heightened responsibility toward parents.

Differences in traditional Mexican-American versus mainstream American values often hinder parents' readiness to loosen direct control and supervision of children as they mature. Parents often react with exaggerated restrictions and discipline when children assimilate into mainstream America at a faster rate than the parents do. A child going off to college, for example, becomes exposed to more varied ideas, which may lead to value changes on the part of the student. These changes often leave the more traditional family members feeling estranged and longing to return to the time before the change in the college student's attitudes. As a consequence, the rapidly acculturating college student my feel alienated from the family and unsure as to where to turn for help and guidance on campus. Situations like this pose important windows of opportunity to the faculty advisor to reach out to the student with guidance and referrals to campus organizations that may begin to fill the void. Also, university officials look at 18 year old college freshmen as adults, with the right to privacy regarding grades, expenses and other university-related issues. The family however, often sees their student as a child who continues to need help and guidance with the university experience. As a consequence, parents may be confused by a university's reticence to breach students' privacy should they inquire about grades and other university related matters. Additionally, they may come to perceive the school as threatening and hostile to their traditional family values.

The assimilating college student may react to the increased parental control and concern with anger, guilt, rebellion and behaviors that allow them some degree of power or control (Minuchin, et al. 1978). For example, it would not be surprising to find an advisee who appears to have the requisite skills for success in college to be doing poorly in classes. This may be a form of rebellion from parents who were perceived by the student as overly controlling. The rebellion comes in the form of school failure. The student may believe that failing classes is a way of gaining control on the part of the student. Since a college education may be highly valued by the parents, the student can rebel through noncompliance toward the parental value of education.

In general, parents may feel a loss of self-esteem and confusion over the college student's struggle for autonomy. They may misinterpret the student's behaviors as rebellion. The student may exhibit a reluctance to adhere to rules set by parents whom they consider to be out of touch with the realities of society. This contributes to an exaggerated generational gap between Mexican-American parents and their children. The children come to expect increased amounts of independence and autonomy while the parents want continued attachment. The root of the problem is that traditional Mexican-American parents have been taught to perceive these autonomous behaviors as disloyal and disrespectful to their traditional family values.

A student's ethnic identity development is another area of consideration. It refers to attitudes, beliefs and feelings for the dominant culture vis-a-vis one's own culture (Baron, 1991). Advisors should be aware of how the student chooses to ethnically identify him or herself. This can have much bearing on how students may consciously and unconsciously perceive themselves. For instance, persons who identify themselves as Chicanos may have internalized a more politically activist posture than those who have embraced the more neutral Mexican or Mexican-American identification.

Advisors working with traditional Mexican-American students should recognize the importance of "personalismo" as a way to gain acceptance. Personalismo stresses the importance of establishing personal contact, demonstrating respect toward the advisee and a desire to understand, empathize and convey a genuine attempt to be helpful. Traditional Mexican-Americans tend to respond best to professional interventions once a sense of respect and trust has been established, reflecting an overall focus on "personalismo".

The Advisor's Development of the Ethnic Self

It is not necessary that the student and faculty advisor be of the same ethnicity in order to achieve a positive experience in the advisement process. Advisors' comfort and openness to a range of values, experiences and attitudes was found to be correlated with effectively working with

college students regardless of their ethnicities (Ben David, 1990). Being aware of cultural differences and similarities can help advisors avoid misunderstanding normative cultural patterns.

As an example, Anglo-American college students tend to engage in more direct expression of specific feelings and experiences compared to Mexican-American college students who may value indirectness and personal small talk prior to engaging in concrete, specific issues. Several authors have written of the importance of a professional's awareness of his or her own cultural self and values in professional interventions (Sue & Sue, 1990; McGoldrick, et al, 1982; Falicov, C. 1983; Helms, 1985). Faculty advisors who encounter cultural differences can be most effective when they have come to appreciate their own cultural values and are able to maintain an openness and acceptance of others' cultural differences (Ben David, 1990). An advisor who recognizes and appreciates his or her own ethnicity is in a better position to understand and empathize with a student's ethnic issues.

Culturally Sensitive Advising

When working with Mexican-American college students, faculty advisors may find it helpful to supplement traditional approaches with the following interventions:

(1) Try to discover the student's values and attitudes about life in general and the university environment in particular. Unresolved issues in these areas may contribute to a student's feelings of anger, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and an inability to succeed in college. If there are problems, an introduction and referral to the campus counseling service or to special programs for Latino students (if available) would be helpful.

(2) Be sensitive when talking to students. Messages from others in positions of authority, such as the faculty advisor, can increase feelings of inferiority when students are not yet comfortable in the ways of the college or university.

(3) Look for ways to build ethnic pride which thereby increases self esteem and self confidence. The simplest way to do this is to show an interest in the advisee as a person. As a consequence, cultural values will most certainly be disclosed.

(4) Normalize possible feelings of embarrassment and/or shame that may arise from the student's cultural bias' against asking for help outside the family. Some Mexican-Americans may carry an unconscious sense of inferiority that may lead to feelings of "unentitlement". As a consequence, they may not ask for help when they need it because they may feel that they do not deserve the help.

(5) Once a trusting relationship has been established between the advisor and advisee, it can be useful to discuss the student's feelings about school, especially negative feelings such as anger, sadness, fear and distrust. These may be related to feelings of discrimination (Baron, 1991).

When undertaking academic advising with Mexican-American students, there may be a tendency to overlook strengths and life management skills because of a student's speaking accent or immigrant status. Also, Mexican-Americans, like other minorities, have both an individual and group identity. Respecting them as individuals and recognizing within group differences such as varying levels of acculturation or socioeconomic status is important. A worthwhile goal for advisors would be to promote **bicultural** attitudes in their advisees rather than encouraging then to move away from the mother culture in favor of the dominant culture. Biculturalism is the ability for a person to function effectively in both the dominant culture and the minority culture in a given society.

The notion of promoting biculturalism is especially important because of Mexican-Americans' tendency to turn to an extended kin network for aid and comfort. This is generally considered to have an adaptive function within the extended kin network (Vega, 1990). In fact, Markides, et al (1986), cited a much lower incidence of psychiatric treatment of Mexican-Americans as compared to other groups. This may be largely due to the strong family support system that protects and nurtures the individual. Ramirez (1980) also found a positive relationship between the extent and size of the extended kin group a person has available and the person's mental health status. He suggests that the larger and geographically closer the extended family is, the better a person's mental health status.

Often, very subtle changes in attitudes and behaviors can have a dramatic impact on the efficacy of the advising session. The suggestions described above are not intended to encourage the college or university advisor to radically change effective approaches to the advising process. Slight modifications in attitude, well-placed words of encouragement and a commitment to student success can have a dramatic impact on retention and graduation.

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