

“I Can’t Help Them Enough” – Secondary School Counselors

Preparing Latinx Students for College

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Abstract

Little is known about the experiences of school counselors in their role of disseminating college information to Latinx students. In this study, ten school counselors provided qualitative data which was then analyzed by the researchers for major themes. Themes highlighted the critical role of social capital: school counselors serve an overwhelming number of students, parental involvement is key, early intervention is crucial, parents and students have misperceptions about college, finances appear to be the largest road block to college access, and fear of leaving home function as a barrier for Latinx students. Findings revealed that school counselors in the study faced challenges of addressing inequality in college access, especially for Latinx first-generation students.

Keywords: secondary school counselor, high school counselor, role of school counselors, Latinx college enrollment, higher education, college knowledge, college access, college enrollment, college admittance

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Children are often asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” It is a seemingly innocuous question, yet there is much that influences vocational decisions, including, but not limited to, gender, parents and family, culture, life phase, self-efficacy socioeconomic status, and standardized test results (Stikkelorum, 2009). This question and the pursuit of a vocation become even more pressing for youth during the secondary school years as they prepare for the next phases of life. One aim of secondary schools is to prepare students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or race, for post-secondary achievements, including employment and/or the pursuit of higher education. Yet, many college-aspiring youth, ethnic minorities in particular, struggle with successfully transitioning from secondary school to college and with completing higher education degrees (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). Data from the Pew Research Center (Krogstad, 2016) indicate that in comparison to 63% of Asians, 41% of Whites, and 22% of Blacks, only 15% of Latinx over the age of 25 hold bachelor’s degrees. Additional research has shown that undocumented students are less likely to pursue higher education with roughly only 5% to 10% enrolling in college (Sanchez-Gonzalez, Castillo, Montague, & Lynch, 2019).

Thus, for Latinx youth in particular, attending college is often a generational leap. In this regard, the school counselor is often a student’s first college access entry point. Typically, school counselors are tasked with assisting students in navigating college and career transitions. While research exists about the role of school counselors, currently, there is little to no research on school counselors’ own perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs

about their capacity to provide youth, especially Latinx youth, with the information to successfully navigate access to higher education and career pathways. Latinx students face particular challenges to higher education enrollment, which include social, cultural, historical, bureaucratic, and economic barriers (Gonzales, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to explore the collective story of ten secondary school counselors who work in Latinx-majority schools in the South Texas region to ascertain areas that can be targeted for improvement as they serve the growing population of Latinx college aspiring youth and their families. This study attempted to answer two research questions: (a) what are the roles of school counselors? and (b) what are the experiences and perspectives of high school counselors relative to transitioning primarily Latinx high school students to higher education?

A useful framework is the theory of social capital, the interpersonal resources available to inform an individual's rational action (Coleman, 1988). High school students' social capital includes their friends, family, teachers, mentors, networks of connection, and, importantly, their school counselor. Social capital can be considered in three forms: obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms (Coleman, 1988). A student's social ecosystem can benefit or block them in any of these forms, moving them toward certain life choices such as seeking higher education or joining the workforce immediately out of high school. In this study, we see how all three forms of social capital operate as the high school counselor attempts to fulfill their duties. Chlup et al. (2019) explored Latinx high school students' perceptions and experiences of obtaining information about going to college, discovering that they perceived three barriers related to social capital: the scarcity of time and opportunity to meet with school

counselors, not knowing where to start in exploring the college option, and not having the world-of-work knowledge they need to make feasible decisions. In an earlier study, Chlup et al. (2016) gathered high school students' parents' perceptions of the social capital needed to send their children to college. Remarkable overlap emerged in the experiences of students, school counselors, and parents.

Position of the High School Counselor

Roles and Expectations

The role of school counselors has continuously shifted over time. In the 1950s and early 1960s, school counselors' roles with secondary students centered on vocational guidance (Skutley, 2006). However, in the late 1960s and 1970s school counselors' role shifted to focus on college preparation. A negative consequence of this shift led to more privileged students being selected by school counselors more often than not to be guided toward higher education (McKillip et al., 2012; Rosenbaum, Rafiullah, Miller, & Krei, 1996). However, in the 1990s the role of school counselors shifted from information gatekeepers to information suppliers (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, n.d.), the role of school counselors is to foster safe learning environments that promote equity and protect the human rights of all school members. School counselors are also expected to fulfill administrative duties, perform non-guidance activities such as record keeping and testing, and assist students in their postsecondary planning including navigating higher education options (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; McKillip et al., 2012).

One of the challenges that school counselors face in meeting the demands of their role is keeping up with the changes within schools and society across time. In a *Chicago Tribune* article (Hutkin, 2015), Michele Vieu, a secondary school counselor in La Grande, Illinois, stated:

In school counseling, our work is changing on a daily basis and it can be a challenge to keep up. From trends in social media to college admissions, and career training to standardized tests, we're continuously working to educate ourselves on the latest and greatest in order to further support and guide our students (para. 14).

Thus, school counselors are overwhelmed with not only serving as information suppliers but digesting consistently changing information in a rapidly advancing society.

Gatekeeping as a Barrier

According to ASCA (2019), the recommended student-to-counselor ratio should be 250:1; however, school counselors are often serving much larger numbers, averaging 455:1. Scholars contend that high student-to-counselor ratios may cause school counselors to act as gatekeepers, making deliberate choices about which students get college advising, as a means of effectively using their time (McKillip et al., 2012). When school counselors act as gatekeepers, they deliver college information to students whom they believe are more likely to succeed in higher education. Such gatekeeping undermines the role school counselors play in promoting equity in schools.

Unfortunately, resource limitations, large student-to-counselor ratios, and changing school needs limit the assistance school counselors can provide to their students.

Moreover, access to a postsecondary education is not equally distributed in the United States. Students who are historically underrepresented at the postsecondary

level, such as students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and first-generation students, are much less likely to prepare for, apply for, enroll in, and graduate from postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Latinx, as well as other minorities, fit this profile. Latinx students are more likely to have economic disadvantages, siblings who dropped out of school, limited-English proficiency, parents who did not graduate from high school, their own children during high school, or parents without postsecondary experience (Schneider, B., Martinez, S., Ownes, A. 2006). Furthermore, lack of understanding about financial aid for college is one of the main reasons Latinx students do not pursue college (Stern, 2009). While financial considerations are a large barrier for Latinx students, research has found that when students have an increased knowledge about financial aid, they are more likely to enroll in college (McKillip et al., 2012).

The weight of these cumulative forces further reduces college opportunities for Latinx youth, so much so that studies have shown Latinx youth are much less likely to aspire to postsecondary education, enroll in postsecondary education, be academically qualified for postsecondary education, enroll in selective postsecondary institutions, maintain continuous enrollment through the degree, complete a postsecondary education, or earn a degree in four years (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). For Latinx students, access to a knowledgeable school counselor may provide the social capital needed to promote college access. Unfortunately, we know very little about the experience of high school counselors as they seek to meet the needs of Latinx students. In this study, the authors utilized a qualitative approach in an attempt to

understand high school counselor experiences and perspectives in Latinx-majority high schools on meeting the needs of Latinx high school students.

This study was also a part of a larger mixed-method study conducted in a bottom-up approach, designed to test the effectiveness of a curriculum entitled Families for College. This curriculum is geared toward providing assistance to Latinx families when enrolling students in college. The school counselors' focus group, which is the focus of this paper, was one among a series of focus groups in the South Texas.

Method

This study was conducted in a south Texas-Mexico border town school district. The school district was 98% Hispanic, with 66% of the entire student body considered at-risk, 96% considered economically disadvantaged, and 33% deemed limited-English proficient (LEP). The participants for this study were 10 secondary school counselors from an independent rural school district located in the South Texas border region. Participants were identified from three high schools that were participating in the larger study and were invited to participate by the research team. Seven participants were women and three were men. Experience of the school counselors averaged 12 years with a range of 0 to 31 years. Demographic information is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Male	18
Participant 2	Male	18
Participant 3	Female	13
Participant 4	Female	31
Participant 5	Female	18
Participant 6	Female	2
Participant 7	Male	7
Participant 8	Female	0
Participant 9	Female	7
Participant 10	Female	6

One focus group session was conducted with the participants at one of the region's high schools for a duration of approximately sixty-five minutes. The focus group method involved a semi-structured interview protocol, meaning all participants were asked the same guiding questions, with follow-up questions as necessary to clarify or elaborate upon responses. Semi-structured interviews are typically used when researchers seek to gain a greater understanding of the responses provided as they delve into a specific topic (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

The focus group protocol examined the experiences and perspectives of the secondary school counselors in preparing Latinx students for college. The questions focused on the support that school counselors believed Latinx students needed to be successful in pursuing and being admitted to college. Questions also elicited information on the strategies that school counselors used to disseminate information regarding college to secondary school students and their families. During the focus group, the researchers asked guiding questions, probed for additional information, requested

clarification when needed, and prompted participants for further details of their perceptions and experiences.

The focus group was audio recorded and session notes were written by the researchers. The audio recording of the focus group was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, and data from the focus group were analyzed through a method of analytic induction to determine major themes and findings. As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study was to better understand the perspectives and perceived barriers inherent in the counselor-student relationship relative to college and transition planning.

Thematic Analysis of Group Discussion

The authors analyzed the focus transcripts inductively to identify emergent thematic trends (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Analytic induction involved three readers to minimize unwarranted opinions or distorted interpretations of the data (Burnard, 1991). Two authors not involved in the data collection conducted the analytic induction. The authors separately read and coded the transcript for trends, themes, and interpretations. The authors then discussed their findings, compared their results for internal consistency, and produced consensus labels for the themes. To ensure consistency, the first author then coded the transcripts again through a third reading. The themes of this study were: (a) Latinx students experience several cultural barriers hindering their pursuit of higher education, (b) repetition is important when disseminating college information, (c) parental involvement in college discussions is key, and (d) college can open possibilities.

Results

Commonalities Among the School Counselors' Perceptions

Analysis of the focus group data revealed several overarching, often interrelated, concerns. For example, while higher education is a major goal for Latinx high school students, through communications with the school counselors in this study, it was clear that students perceived several barriers. Specifically, school counselors consistently communicated that they serve an overwhelming number of students, leading to difficulty in meeting the needs of the students they are tasked with serving. Early intervention and parental involvement was expressed as a key factor in successfully transitioning students to college, yet more often than not due to barriers in communication and participation, parents and students had misperceptions of higher education including financial aid availability and options, which was cited as one of the largest barriers regarding college attendance. Lastly, counselors also expressed that the fear of leaving home was a significant barrier for students and families.

Perceptions of College – The Possibilities

The focus group began with introductions between participants followed by questions and discussion of what college means. Responses included *opportunity*, *change of life*, *empowerment*, *new experiences*, and *a better future*. Overall, the participants expressed the belief that college is for everyone and provides students the opportunity for new experiences, leading to a better life. However, many of the responses to the question, *What does going to college mean to you?* did not identify the students' talents, self-actualization, or service to humanity in one way or another.

The school counselors then discussed how they prepare students and their families for college. The school counselors suggested that college admissions preparation should begin in elementary and middle school and that establishing a mindset for graduation among students and parents early is vital so that students believe in themselves. One strategy recommended by the school counselors was to refer to students as the “class of 2030” and so forth in elementary grades. One counselor stated, “Start them young and get them into the college mindset. It's not, *if* you go to college. No, you're *going* to college for everybody's got their niche.” Another counselor remarked, “I think [that college is] something that they want to do, but sometimes their hands are tied so to speak – not because they don't want to, but possibly because they feel that they don't know enough and they feel like maybe, I can't help them enough.” In more detail, one counselor described:

I've been in elementary and it starts in elementary – it starts in elementary by introducing different careers, what do you like, what are you good at, what are your gifts? And we try to explore that in the child, trying to have the kids research or investigate, or ask what are my options?

Another counselor added:

At our campus we have parent meetings, parent orientations, we try to have them at every grade level but especially at the junior/senior level with junior school counselors and senior school counselors to keep them [parents] informed as to what the process is in preparing for college, the applications, the scholarships, the financial aid, step by step.

Interestingly, although the school counselors emphasized the significance of early intervention in improving students' transitions from secondary school to higher education, none of the school counselors mentioned partnerships with middle or

elementary schools to assist in fostering college preparation, nor peer mentoring programs between local colleges and the secondary schools served by the school counselors.

School counselors further elaborated that some students felt pressure from parents, regardless of where families were residing, to finish school and begin working in labor-intensive jobs to assist their families' make ends meet. For these families it was not unusual for adults to work two or three jobs to support the household. To overcome these barriers, school counselors noted that they try to inculcate in students the notion that going to college and earning a degree is an investment with future financial advantages including vocational opportunities that will help in financially assisting their family. While the school counselors acknowledged that it would be beneficial for parents and students to share the same vision for future education and family prosperity, they did not discuss specific strategies to build such linked visions. Rather, the school counselors reiterated that early intervention could ameliorate conflicting perspectives of higher education between students and their parents.

Many of the school counselors sympathized with the experiences of their students in terms of parental pressure and expectations. A few school counselors reflected on their own secondary educational experiences and their transitions to higher education, recalling that their families preferred to remain living close to one another in a community due to family interdependence. One counselor stated, "mom had me in a bubble and I wasn't going anywhere." However, this counselor used her life experiences as stories and lessons to encourage high school students to pursue their goals.

Furthermore, focus group data revealed a student's misperception that a four-year college was the only option that led to a good career while other post-secondary pathways such as community colleges and specialty schools (e.g., culinary institutes, mechanics colleges) were not considered. One counselor shared,

A lot of them hear higher ed and they think, "Oh no, another four more years of school," you know, and that's where we have to inform them and tell them that it doesn't have to be four years, you can go to one year, two year, there are even six-month certificates and so on and so forth. Anything that is going to give them their post-secondary education.

Another counselor echoed these sentiments and expressed how it is important to "show [students] the possibilities." School counselors also remarked that many students have misunderstandings about the college application process, such as the acceptability of applying to more than one school, which led into the discussion of communication and information dissemination strategies.

Strategies – Repetition and Repetition and Repetition

When asked about what they do to prepare parents and students about going to college, the school counselors shared that they work hard to get students into a college mindset by repeatedly exposing students to college information. More specifically, the school counselors noted that they feel the need to flood students with college information so that it is retained. One counselor clarified by saying, "You say it one time and we can't expect that they're really going to learn. They keep on hearing it and hearing it. I think its repetition and repetition and repetition." School counselors also pointed out that preparing students and their families for college is a group effort. One counselor reflected:

School counselors go to the classrooms, they start there with making their classroom presentations to the students informing the students who we hope in turn go inform their parents. Then we'll start getting the parents calling us, and the teachers get involved giving them assignments pertaining to college readiness or college awareness. It's not just where the school counselors are responsible for informing the students, it's a group effort really.

School counselors also described how information was disseminated to students and their families through a variety of methods. One counselor shared,

It can't be one [method] because everybody's different and there has to be different, several approaches to reach students. Because each one has a different need. They might have the same grades, but we don't know what's going on at home. What do they need? Everybody's needs are different in my opinion. There is not just one approach that we can take.

School counselors identified useful strategies for sharing information about college, including holding senior student interviews, parent meetings, open-house events, sending out mass communication through email, in-class presentations, and referrals to websites and college advisors. "We just outreach as much as we can in different ways." One counselor also noted that the information sessions held at their school were provided in English and Spanish. Unfortunately, the school counselors said that while they implemented these strategies, successfully disseminating information to students and their families was difficult and that parental attendance to college information sessions was often low. One counselor remarked that out of "almost 2,800 students, we probably have 300-400 parents show up" at information sessions. Similarly, another counselor elaborated that even with all the advertising efforts implemented to notify parents of pending informational sessions, roughly "5-10% of the

entire class of parents actually show up.” Another counselor stated that working to increase parental involvement and attendance at information meetings was like “tug of war” and that parents lacked the viewpoint that they need to take leadership in such matters such as college preparation and access. In other words, they seemed to defer to the school or school counselors.

Moreover, despite identifying several strategies to convey information to students and their families, two school counselors pointed out being aware that students perceived the school counselors to be unhelpful. In response, the school counselors highlighted being overwhelmed with the scope of their roles. The school counselors shared that “it’s really nearly impossible to sit with every student” at their school since many school counselors served over at least 400 students each. One counselor elaborated that “the ratio is outrageous, I mean, sometimes we have 500, 600, 700 students to one counselor, so how can you reach all those students for one person?” While the school counselors asserted that they strived to serve students to the best of their abilities, they underscored the need for more support to realistically meet the needs of all students. Although the school counselors highlighted the need for greater support, they did not identify specific strategies or aids that could be provided to assist them in better serving students. Another counselor reflected on the scope of their role and that school counselors are not necessarily knowledgeable about every career or vocation that students are interested in. She shared:

I’ve made them write down what they wanted to do. One of them said he wanted to do neuro-something. So, I went through and I found all this stuff, I didn’t even know it existed. But I went and found something. That way, I can say, here, you can look at this.

She further clarified that she was able to take time to research the students' career choice because she had more support than some of the other school counselors in the focus group, and that without such support, individualized attention would be impossible to provide.

Several times throughout the focus group school counselors also noted that when students had older siblings, friends, or family members who had pursued college, their preparation for and understanding of college was superior to their peers without guidance from family members or friends.

Parental Involvement – This Is Important

The school counselors stressed the significance of parent involvement throughout the focus group. In fact, this was the largest point school counselors consistently brought up when responding to the questions posed by the researchers. One counselor noted, “educating the parents so they can understand, really this is important” was a top priority. Another counselor emphasized the significance of having parents being “a part of the commitment” in supporting the education of their children.

One counselor, who worked at an early college preparatory school, reflected on how their students and parents were “already invested” in going to college and that the commitment of the students drove the commitment of the families. The counselor explained that at their specific school students could earn 60 or more college credits by the time they graduate secondary school “so the enticement is there, they want to learn, they want to be there.” However, the counselor indicated that such a school is “not for everybody” due to the high academic demands students experience and that “there are a lot sacrifices that students make” to flourish in that environment.

Overall, the school counselors noted that they had perceived a shift in parental involvement trends. One counselor specifically reflected on the change in parental involvement from elementary to secondary school stating, “I noticed that the parents stopped getting too involved. In elementary, everybody was there in the meeting, but once it hit middle school it was different, there was a big change. And so the parents are not too involved.” Another counselor added that they believe it is critical for students to have continuous support throughout their education trajectory and not just in the early years.

One counselor suggested that if parents participated in joint student-parent projects, it might foster a sense of confidence, accomplishment and achievement that could further fuel joint involvement with an opportunity to experience family “triumph.”

She revealed:

I've read about some program where the parent and the child were both viewing the same thing and the parents were getting just as excited as the students were because they were actually doing it at the same time. So, they shared the feeling together. And it wasn't just, “Oh, let me tell my mom about it” but they shared it.

When asked to elaborate on which communication methods were more effective, it was clear that email or phone communication was more effective than meetings depending upon location and the resources of families. One counselor stated:

One thing that helped a lot was the Internet, you know with e-mails letting the parents know. Now the parents are more aware, you know, they know how to use the computer.

Another counselor expressed that while phone and email were a consistent means of contacting parents, “Phone numbers are changing every week. So that makes

it very challenging.” Thus, parental contact information was not always up-to-date or accurate. Additionally, some of the students’ parents lived in Mexico, limiting family involvement and the options school counselors had for communicating with the families.

To overcome these obstacles one counselor shared how their school started an innovative *Roadside Coffee* program in which parents were served coffee when they dropped off their students so that the school counselors could briefly exchange information with them. She explained:

We have a program that's called Roadside Coffee so that parents that drop off their kids – we give them free coffee and that's when we swoop in with a commercial about inviting them to the parent involvement. And it works a lot. I know we don't target the ones that come on the bus, but at least the ones that drop off their kids, so there we tell them come to the parent involvement, the topic is going to be this one, we need you here. It's once a month every Wednesday.

However, this counselor also pointed out that while the program was a success, parents of students who took the bus were not reached. In fact, parental meetings were the method of communication that was cited as the *least* successful method of communicating with parents, as few parents showed up.

The school counselors also noted how parents would convey feelings of inadequacy and feel embarrassed about what they didn't know in terms of college for their children. One counselor stated, “A lot of the parents are shying away because they don't know what we're talking about. So, early intervention and giving them the empowerment to know that this is coming is really important.” Language barriers were cited as an additional source of feelings of inadequacy in parents.

Although the school counselors expressed some concern and frustration over parental support and involvement because it was a challenge to obtain, they acknowledged that preparing students for college was a group effort involving the school counselors, secondary school teachers, higher education institutions, parents, and students. A few school counselors mentioned that some secondary school teachers devoted class time to projects or assignments requiring students to complete scholarship applications. Additionally, the school counselors mentioned school career fairs as a way of connecting students with information on different vocations. However, more specific or lengthier collaborative efforts were not mentioned.

Barriers and Cultural Issues – Just Trying to Survive

Despite efforts to share information and resources on the benefits of going to college, school counselors perceived that, as a group, the Latinx parents in their schools felt “their kind just don’t go to college.” Further, the school counselors conveyed that parents believed that the role of a parent is to get the child to school, and then it is the school’s job to get students into college. One counselor reflected that “[parents] think we should take care of students. A lot of parents come in and say we want you to take care of it, that’s what you’re there for. You’re there to teach my kids. That’s the culture.” In other words, according to the school counselors, parents expected that the school counselors would help students determine school choices and fill out college applications and financial aid applications with little to no involvement on their part.

Further, school counselors revealed that there is a belief among many of the economically stressed Latinx communities surrounding district, that once students graduate from high school, the students have a responsibility to help the family make

ends meet. As previously mentioned, in the Latinx culture, it is not uncommon to expect youth, after graduation from school, to begin working to help support the family. One counselor clarified the context of the communities:

Because we live close to the border, our kids, some of them are just trying to survive. And college is not even in their plans because again, they don't have parents here. Their parents are in Mexico, or they live with a neighbor or a tía or a compadre that is not even related to them. So, I think that if we can reach the kids, the students, and again, lift their self-esteem and have them believe that it only takes one person to just believe in that kid. A lot of us have seen some of the kids are in a very dysfunctional homes, they become great engineers and doctors and you say, "How did this child make it?" Because it all started with the student. So I think that if we're able to reach out and again, all the information, but just make them believe, "Yes, you're going to do it, you're going to be fine, you're going to make it no matter what you see," then they'll be able to take the challenges and be successful.

Another counselor shared a story of guiding students through the college application process:

Some of them I noticed were like, "No, my parents told me that I need to finish, graduate, so I can start working to help them." So, then I use my computer to show them, OK, when you graduate from high school, this is what you earn. But after a two-year associate's or a bachelor's, this is how much you're going to gain now. Because it's part of the culture that no, no, no, you need to graduate so you can help me.

Although the importance of instilling confidence in students was echoed by all the school counselors, finances were another barrier discussed by the school counselors as a reason for students' and parents' apprehension about attending college. One

counselor reflected on how there is a misconception on the part of students and their families about finances for college:

I ask [students] where are you going to go to college? And they say, "I can't go." I ask why not? "Well because we don't have money, my parents can't afford it."

The parents are not informed of how much money is really out there, that money should not be a barrier. Maybe all of it isn't going to be free, but even if there are loans, they'll have time to pay them back at very reasonable payments and so on and so forth. Money is one of the biggest things, they think they need to pay it up front, like cash right away.

Another counselor shared how she explains to her students how different institutions offer different financial aid packages and how to plan for the financial piece of college or post-secondary education:

Have you filled out your applications? Have you done your financial aid PIN number yet?" All these things, even some of my top kids still do not understand that they can do their financial aid, send it to five different colleges and then they're going to get five different results. They're going to send you a package back as well and then you sit down with your family and say it's going to cost me X amount of dollars to go here, X amount of dollars to go here, and you can decide what you can handle. But even my top kids don't understand that.

As previously mentioned, school counselors expressed the desire to see student confidence about going to college increase along with the courage to tell their parents what they want for their own future. However, school counselors note that students struggle with communicating their desires for many of them have not traveled outside of the south Texas town that borders Mexico and know that their families have apprehensions about their leaving home. School counselors try to inform students that "You can leave, it's okay. And it's okay to come back also." Further, school counselors

believed that if parents were more informed about college, their fears about children leaving home would be reduced. School counselors discussed that often parents fear that in college their child will be without a support system in an environment that is new and overwhelming to them. School counselors recommended that to address these fears, parent campus visits are beneficial. Without visiting college campuses, the college information students and parents obtain on from school counselors can seem disconnected from reality.

A few school counselors remarked that college campus visits “opened [students’ and parents’] eyes” to the atmosphere of college and increased students’ desires and motives for attending post-secondary education. Further, college campus visits helped both students and parents gain a feeling for a sense of community that campuses establish which ultimately comforted parents to know that their children are “not going to be alone in the world.” Thus, the school counselors concluded that college campus visits can positively change parents’ perspectives on college, making it easier for them to let their children go. Unfortunately, the school counselors agreed that not all secondary schools have the necessary funding to take students on college campus visits even though they believe it is the most effective method in disseminating knowledge on college and building buy-in to the benefits of college.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that school counselors highly value and support efforts targeting post-secondary education for all students. However, school counselors struggle with disseminating college admissions and financial planning information to Latinx students and their families due to several factors including the

sheer volume and complexity of school counselors' roles, lack of school funding and support, lack of early intervention, lack of participation from students and parents, and Latinx family work expectations. All these problems can be interpreted from the framework of social capital analysis (Coleman, 1988): "The way action is shaped, constrained, and redirected by the social context" (p. S95).

Unfortunately, according to the findings of this study and other research, school counselors find it difficult to meet the needs of all their students. The school counselors underscored that they take their tasks seriously, striving to reach as many students as possible. Yet, despite their best efforts to prepare students for life after secondary school, it became apparent to the school counselors that students perceived them to be unhelpful. Similar student sentiments were found in a study conducted by Vela-Gude et al. (2009) where students conveyed that school counselors "were never there" for advisement. This perception is exacerbated by the fact that school counselors often work with large caseloads (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 1996; Walz & Bleuer, 2014; Wei-Cheng, Li, & Hoetmer., 2016). Sadly, it is not shocking that the school counselors in this study served a large volume of students and felt overwhelmed since on average one counselor serves 482 students and often struggles to balance the complexity of their responsibilities (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Walz & Bleuer, 2014). The school counselors conveyed that serving such a large number of students made it nearly impossible for them to serve each student's individual needs. Consequently, as found in other research, the school counselors advocated for smaller caseloads (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). The results of this research lend weight to previous findings that when school counselors are overloaded

and overburdened with a myriad of responsibilities, their effectiveness and relationships with students are ultimately negatively affected. From the social capital perspective, information flow “usually comes through social relationships that are maintained for other purposes” (Coleman, 1988, p. S104). School counselors usually have a nonreciprocal role in students’ and parents’ lives, instead of existing in an embedded position where the information they offer would be accessible through many channels (family relations, church, workplace, sites of leisure).

By implementing early intervention strategies, such as parent information meetings beginning in the elementary school years, the school counselors contended that in-group suspicions could be curtailed and instead, mutual belief and commitment to the pursuit of higher education could be fostered among students and families. Mutual belief is vital in changing Latinx perceptions of higher education. Specifically, our sample revealed a discrepancy between the cultural perspectives of Latinx families and American schools (Rodriguez, Rhodes, & Aguirre, 2015). In this study the school counselors noted that the parents of the students they served endorsed the belief that Latinx do not go to college since there was an emphasis on family duty. Furthermore, while a Latinx high school student’s social capital most likely includes networks of people that connect them with paying jobs after graduation, the networks connecting them with college life are slender or absent. Our finding that having a brother or sister who attended college opens the door for other siblings supports the idea that concrete personal relations are the powerful source of social capital. Further, the school counselors acknowledged that some students were undocumented, which meant they were residing in the United States without family members to support them, and as a

result, were less likely to pursue higher education. However, according to theory, school counselors would need to be further embedded in the social fabric of the community to make this happen. An effective network involves movement of resources and information in multiple directions, not just from experts.

The idea of social capital is directly related to Latinx's perceptions of financial capital: without a flow of information about financial aid, families assume that they don't have the money to send a child to college (Frank, Davis, & Elgar, 2014). In this study, school counselors conveyed that one of the main reasons that students did not pursue college was family and student misconceptions about financial aid. The school counselors indicated that students and their families were often not aware of the different financial options such as federal aid, scholarships, and loans that were available to them, and that different types of aid did not include repayment, or that repayment plans were more flexible than assumed. As previously mentioned, research indicates that when students attain knowledge about financial aid options, they are less likely to view finances as an obstacle and are more likely to enroll in college (McKillip et al., 2012).

Limitations

While this study's findings reinforce previous empirical evidence, the results should be interpreted in the context of some limitations. This study was conducted in a Latinx high school that primarily serves low socioeconomic families, which limit the replicability of this study with other ethnicities. Furthermore, since the location of this study was in a region that primarily serves low socioeconomic families, the challenges faced by the school counselors and high school students and their families may not be

generalizable to other socioeconomic levels or regions in the country. Lastly, since the data were gathered in one focus group session, the data are limited to what the participants stated at that time.

Future Directions for Research and Action

In this study, the authors found that four themes emerged as salient to school counselors as they consider their roles in college access for Latinx students. These themes included: college can open possibilities, repetition is important when disseminating college information, parental involvement in college discussions is key, and Latinx students experience several cultural barriers hindering their pursuit of higher education. Despite national and state education reform efforts to better serve students, school counselors are often omitted from these reform endeavors (Wei-Cheng et al., 2016). Through the inclusion of school counselors in reform efforts, schools would be better able to meet the needs of their students by more clearly ascertaining the social and economic contexts of the students in which they serve (Steen & Noguera, 2010). Moreover, school counselors who themselves engage in these social contexts are likely to hold influence in informal, incidental ways as part of everyday life. Another tactic rarely used, according to our research, is encouraging the growth of personal empowerment for high school students through fostering social networks among adults and families who have succeeded in sending children to college and families who haven't done so yet. For example, school counselors and teachers could help students brainstorm about people in their and their families' acquaintances who could give them advice about heading for college, making use of the social capital that lies underused. Research from Alejandro and Hipolito-Delgado (2018) supports the aforementioned

idea and found that when high school students experience supportive relationships from multiple sources, including family, other adults, and peers, their personal empowerment increases. Future studies of specific college preparation strategies and analysis of their successes and flaws will clarify how school counselors, parents, and students can advance equality of educational opportunity, a major and longstanding goal of the United States.

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