Strengthening the PK-20 Pipeline: College For All, Get With It!

The issue of Hispanic students’ underrepresentation in college enrollment and graduation is a problem with major societal consequences. Its inattention coupled with the consistent increase of the Hispanic student population in the nation’s schools has devastating outcomes (Glover-Blackwell, Kwoh, & Pastor, 2010). A report by the Census Bureau (2009) provides a range of data that attests to the achievement gap between White and minority students—specifically Hispanic students—in terms of high school and college attainment levels. A similar report by the NCES shows that Hispanic students’ enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs in 2009 constituted only 6% of the total student population, the lowest among the major racial and ethnic groups (US Dept. of Education, 2011). Furthermore, the numbers of Latinos who enroll at 2-year institutions are significantly higher than their White and African American peers (Fry, 2002). This data raises questions about post-graduation aspirations and college access for Hispanic high school students, in terms of the school institutional factors that affect their college readiness. The role that schools and teachers play in preparing Hispanic students for college cannot be understated, given the alarming data on college-going and persistence for this particular student population.

This paper presents the initial findings of a research case study that is in progress in a rural south Texas school district. It outlines the efforts of the “College For All: Get With It!” initiative to address a district’s efforts to focusing on the needs of their Hispanic student population. The first part of this study consisted of professional development, extended field observations and a collection of artifacts. The next phase of the study will consist of interviews and focus groups with teachers and administrators in the district and the community college.
Background and Context

As the data from the Census Bureau (2009) and NCES (2011) reports indicate, there is a significant college completion gap for Hispanic students, and there is a dire need to address the roots of this gap. Numerous scholars have examined the ramifications of schooling inequities upon the larger Latino population, and their effect on post-secondary education. The research on common tracking practices provides evidence of how the numbers of minority students are much higher than their white counterparts in special education programs (O’Connor & Deluca-Fernandez, 2006), and lower in advanced classes like the GT program and AP courses in high school, where they are tracked into less advanced classes and remedial courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). The consequences extend to low college enrollment for minority students, as advanced course credit weighs heavily in college admission standards (2002), making it more difficult for Latino students to enroll. This leads, in part, to the “leaking” educational pipeline, whereby only 6 out of every 100 Hispanic students in elementary school persist and graduate with a Bachelor’s degree from a four-year college (2002). In a study of Texas high school graduates in 2006-2007, Moore et al. (2010) present data for Hispanic students that indicate that only one-fifth of high school seniors were deemed college-ready, compared to nearly half of White graduates.

The lack of college readiness has a direct relation to the future of the nation with the demographic changes that will see minorities—specifically Hispanics— as the majority population group in a few decades (Glover Blackwell et al., 2010). A high school diploma alone is no longer enough, and by 2020 65% of the jobs will require some form of post-secondary education (Lumina Foundation, 2013). Given the lower high school and college attainment rates for minorities, there is a risk that the majority of the population will not be equipped with the
necessary skills to perform these jobs, leaving the nation at a financial risk (Glover Blackwell et al., 2010). Addressing the needs of the Hispanic student population at a district like Southern County ISD is vital not only for the immediate community, but for the larger good of the state and nation as well.

The achievement and attainment gaps can be attributed to what Darling-Hammond (2010) refers to as the “opportunity gap” for minority students, where these students lack access to high quality curricula, resources, and relevant instructional practices (Contreras, 2011). Other factors can include what Valencia (1997) terms “deficit-based thinking” on part of the educators that lump minority students in less advanced classes. These gaps can also be traced to the absence of culturally responsive or rich curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2010) that students can relate to. Off campus factors that affect minority students can include weak school-parent partnerships, the effects of poverty, and parents’ low academic attainment, as well as a lack of social and cultural capital that might hinder students’ college-going awareness and admission processes.

“College For All: Get With It!”: Project Goals

College readiness initiatives, such as the “College For All: Get With It!” effort, call for structural, administrative, and instructional modifications to increase curriculum rigor and reduce the achievement gap among diverse student groups at the Southern County Independent School District (SCISD), a rural school district in south Texas. The district serves approximately 4,800 students, 88.9% of whom are Hispanic, and nearly 10% of whom are White. Nearly 80% of the students are Economically Disadvantaged, and 53% are classified as At-Risk. Only 32% of the graduating class was deemed College-Ready in both subjects in 2011, which is lower than the

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1 All the names of the town, school district, high school, and local community college have been changed to maintain privacy.
state average of 52%. Of those students, 62% of White students were college-ready, in comparison to 25% of Hispanic students (TEA, 2012).

The Southern County Independent School District has come under scrutiny on numerous occasions over its dismal graduation rates for their Hispanic student population. The district has a long history of having to ensure the civil rights protections of learners whose first language is not English. In the early 1970s, a group of parents of LEP (Limited English Proficient) students filed a complaint against the district for its failure to provide equal educational opportunity and benefit to their children in the public schools of the community. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) litigated the parents’ charge and was successful in demonstrating that the district violated the civil protections of LEP students. The district was found to be in violation of the federal laws of the land and particularly the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The district was required to create and implement corrective action to address these violations and to assure the protection of the civil rights of this population of their students. The district has been working to address these issues for more than 30 years. While the district is close to satisfying the requirements of the court, there are still challenges that have not been met to the satisfaction of MALDEF. The district is currently working to satisfy all of the remaining charges in order to be released from court oversight. The IDRA South Central Collaborative for Equity provides training and technical assistance to the district as a part of its requirements to take corrective action to address the remaining violations.

The “College For All: Get With It!” initiative aims at advancing structural and transformational practices which administrators and teachers can implement to positively impact marginalized student populations, led by a national community-based organization (Intercultural
Development Research Association), and in partnership with a local higher education institution, Southern Texas Community College (STCC). Its goal is to implement an initiative for college readiness and college-going awareness for all students that begins with the development of a college-going culture in the PK-12 setting and the community at large in Southern County, Texas. This effort involves the school stakeholders, parents, and students and relies on raising awareness and addressing deficit attitudes in teachers as key parts of this initiative.

**Project Target Audience**

In order for this initiative to be successful, the district leadership which includes the school board, superintendent and other central office administrators, and the school administrators at Southern County ISD will be expected to be fully on board with the project. Without strong leadership support, it will be difficult for us to promote the message about the need to increase college-awareness for Hispanic students and create real change on campus. Admittedly, some resistance is expected, but those who are receptive to change can be an influential part of the cultural transformation process. Besides the administrators, the entire teaching faculty on campus will be expected to take part in the series of professional development activities. Parents and students will also be invited to attend information sessions to become more aware of the college-going process, including applications, financial aid, support resources, and so on.

**Methodology**

Qualitative research provides insights into the participants’ voices, patterns, and personal perspectives (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2006; Gay & Airasian, 2003). A qualitative design allows for an in-depth, detailed approach and freedom from preconceived categories (Patton, 2001).
This research is an exploratory case study that explores a bounded phenomenon in depth within its natural setting, and it incorporates the perspectives and experiences of participants to draw a holistic picture of the phenomenon being analyzed (Creswell, 2006). This study seeks to understand how teachers and administrators accept, implement, and experience the structural, curricular, and transformational changes implemented within a district and community in order to create more equity and a community-at-large college-going culture in the immediate region. In an effort to find solutions and explain the phenomenon of interest, the question that guided this research is as follows: What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators in creating an equitable college-going culture and graduating more college-ready students through the implementation of structural, curricular, and transformational changes in their school district?

Phase two of this study will address the overarching research question in addition to the collected artifacts from phase 1, Professional Development. Purposive sampling of (4) teachers, (2) school and district administrators and (1) college administrator will be used in this study. Patton (2001) stated that researchers use the power of purpose sampling by selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. The rationale for using purpose sampling, therefore, is to seek information-rich cases for in-depth study, which will help answer the research question.

The “College For All: Get With It!” professional development training took place over five one-hour sessions with the entire faculty at Southern County High School (SCHS). Separate training sessions were provided for the administrative team, as well as parents and their children. Although the format of the training is more suitable for a longer time frame, in one or two extended sessions, we had to work with the timetable allotted to us by the school administration that did not wish to pull teachers out of the classroom and deviate from their scope and sequence curriculum plan, which includes specific assessment days. We therefore had to divide the
training into multiple sessions, repeated several times daily and over five days, in order to target the entire staff. These professional development sessions included active and reflective processes that incorporated national, state, district, and campus data on students’ high school and post-secondary achievement. They also included research-based analysis and the exploration of numerous case studies of schools that work. This professional development also focused in part on instructional practices that increase student engagement and promote rigor in the classroom, and specifically the English Language Learners population, and several lessons were modeled to teachers in their classrooms.

Findings

Two main themes emerged from our observations and experience conducting the professional development training at the district: 1) Ongoing efforts that support the “College For All: Get With It!” effort, and 2) Resistance to change.

Efforts to Promote a Cultural Transformation

A number of measures are in the process of implementation at the SCISD, in line with the aims of “College For All: Get With It!”. These measures address the need to create and facilitate a college-going culture and awareness in the district, the need for rigorous and relevant curricula that engage and validate students, and the need to develop and nurture meaningful and productive school-community partnerships. As such, the following steps have either been recently put in place, or are in the process of being set up to be implemented in the new academic year, with the support and collaboration of relevant district, school, and community college personnel:
A. Hiring a College and Career Readiness Advisor, whose duties include

i. Conducting training and informational seminars for college awareness and financial aid for students, parents, staff, and community

ii. Assist students and parents in completing and submitting college applications and financial aid forms

iii. Plan and coordinate College and Financial Aid Nights and other college events on campus to facilitate the creation of more college awareness

iv. Assist students in researching careers, identifying career goals, and selecting courses relevant to their academic and career aspirations, and provide academic advising for undecided students

v. Inform and assist in preparing students for dual enrollment through the local community college and other higher education institutions

vi. Serve as a liaison and build a support system between the students and the universities, community colleges, technical and vocational schools

vii. Collaborate with the faculty in fostering college and career readiness in a college-going environment

B. Forming SCISD and STCC collaborative partnership to address the following processes:

i. Curriculum alignment between the high school curriculum, dual credit courses, and the higher education core curriculum. This includes the development of a curriculum matrix that matches and aligns high school graduation requirements and state higher education core curriculum courses. It also
provides students with a course of study plan that helps them to keep track of
their coursework, projected enrollment, grades, and time of completion.

ii. Support services for families that include tutorials, test preparation, informational
meetings with parents on high school and college requirements, college
seminars on campus, transition efforts, college life, etc.

iii. Support services and guidance for the admission requirements and application
process for students and parents

iv. Financial aid services that helps students and parents complete financial aid
applications under the guidance of school and college personnel

v. Transition to college measures, such as campus visits, on-campus summer classes,
attending athletic events and social events on campus, visiting a college class

vi. Test preparation (PSAT, SAT, THEA). Provide students the opportunity to take
these tests early on to identify weaknesses and address them.

C. Conducting a Pilot Program (“College Seekers”) and Selection of the Pilot
Cohort\(^2\), which includes:

i. Selection of student participants. Students will be ranked at the end of the 8\(^{th}\)
grade; those in the 50\(^{th}\) to 80\(^{th}\) percentile will be given the opportunity to join
the “College Seekers” Cohort

ii. Selection of teacher participants. High School and Central Office administrators
will go through an application process to select innovative, culturally-
responsive teachers who validate students and their families.

\(^2\) At the start of the 2013-2014 academic school year, the central office administration-- led by the new
superintendent --decided to delay the assignment of this pilot program cohort, thereby postponing this effort
indefinitely.
iii. The College Transition class (Replacing AVID). This class will prepare students to fulfill the college readiness successful competencies listed below:

a. Critical thinking/ Reasoning and Problem Solving  
b. Collaboration  
c. Creativity  
d. Communication  
e. Research  
f. Organization  
g. Time Management  
h. Self-discipline and self-directed learning  
i. Determination  
j. Sense of Efficacy  
k. Inquiry  
l. Reflection  
m. Attentiveness  
n. Persistence and resiliency  
o. Study skills  
p. Goal Setting  
q. Involvement  

iv. Integration of curriculum. Provide teachers with a set timeframe during the school day for them to meet and plan integrated lessons to address vertical and horizontal curriculum matters to reinforce content and language objectives.

v. Parental engagement and support. Provide parents with bilingual, targeted information sessions on high school and college course requirements and preparation, college admission process, financial aid options, transition activities and resources, and familiarize and educate families on the college “lingo” and college experiences.

vi. Support services for students (cognitive, affective, and social). This is where the teachers and administrators step up and assume responsibility through a culture of authentic care and additive perceptions, to build relationships that extend beyond the classroom. Teachers aim to create a sense of cohesiveness
as a cohort, where students learn to work collectively, rather than as individuals, to learn from one another and work towards a common goal of academic and social excellence. This helps develop a community of learners who encourage and help one another to succeed and aspire to continual success and the acquisition of knowledge, rather than develop competitiveness among them.

vii. Extended day/After-school and Saturday tutorial services to provide opportunities for students to work on assignments under the supervision of tutors and mentors, provide resources such as computer labs, libraries, etc., and resources to work on academic weaknesses.

D. Conducting Professional Development for Teachers, which includes training on:

i. Pre AP/ AP for rigorous curriculum. Allow teachers to participate in professional development sessions that provide them with course-specific content and pedagogical knowledge and methodologies that challenge students to think critically.

ii. Culturally relevant teaching, where the teaching connects classroom experiences to student’s meaningful daily life experiences, which is important for the success of students’ academic performance. It is essential for teachers and administrators to create a school culture that welcomes and validates diversity. Teachers and administrators must be considerate and sensitive to cultural relevance amongst students and families, the community, and programs to enable the formation of positive successful relationships.
iii. Student validation, building relationships and a culture of authentic care that validates students’ social and cultural capital and funds of knowledge. Encourage students to take pride in their culture, language, and heritage, and incorporate these elements in culturally-responsive course materials.

iv. STCC and SCHS faculties to collaborate and facilitate college transition and curriculum efforts. This will facilitate the partnership and collaborative efforts, as already described, to promote student success, persistence, and completion in an institution of higher education.

v. Hold meetings to develop a curriculum matrix between the high school and the higher education curriculum. Create a format for adopting this matrix on a school-wide and college-wide level.

**Resistance to Change**

Creating positive overarching change is never an easy process. This is especially true when there is an attempt to recreate or restructure a campus culture that has consistently failed a large portion of its student population. It is perhaps made even more problematic by the fact that this change is spearheaded and promoted by an external group of educators and practitioners, rather than being largely driven from within the organization itself. Although the group from IDRA had been contacted by the local community college (STCC) to help teachers create a college-going culture at the local school district, there was a tangible perception from several participants that this change was being imposed upon them. These participants made it very clear that they only begrudgingly attended the training sessions because they were required to by the administration and central office. They remained aloof during the sessions, refused to take part in any discussions or group activities, and showed no intention of receiving the new information or
using it to create the much-needed changes on campus. They actively shut us out as presenters and displayed to interest or intention to interact with us or their colleagues.

The artifacts collected from these teachers also indicated their sense of ambivalence and deficit attitudes towards us and the ideals and practices we were trying to promote. The teachers even had the opportunity to examine the numbers specific to their own high school, and to see for themselves the achievement and college-persistence gaps between Hispanic students and white students. They were encouraged to reexamine old habits and practices and to develop new visions centering on community, family, and school partnerships.

Some teachers, however, were so entrenched in their own worldview that they adamantly refused to reconsider other perspectives that challenged their mindsets. When asked to reflect on the importance of school, parent, and community partnerships, for example, one participant responded with “I’m going to draw a chain gang.” Others, when asked to develop a group statement or vision on their roles in helping students succeed in and beyond high school, wrote that, “Only “U” can prevent being left out. Only “U” can learn what is being taught to “u”. Only “U” can apply knowledge and get results! (sic)”. Another group declared that, “Good discipline and hard work lead to success in life.” What these statements betray is the conviction that students moved forward and succeeded through their own merit, and without requiring an additional support from their teachers or schools. The personal statements each teacher developed also indicated similar attitudes that were ambivalent and resilient to change. When asked to write a bold statement that indicates their commitment to excellence and developing college readiness and aspirations, one teacher wrote: “I will do whatever the administration request. I will teach concepts and expect students to master them through performance
standards,” thereby not taking any personal responsibility as a teacher to advance students further than the requirements of the basic high school performance standards.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings reveal the need for educators to be totally committed to embrace and meet the needs of the student population so that they can be content and language proficient and college ready. Education today demands reform and redesign efforts of the educational spectrum in order to accomplish basic goals and standards of public education to address the achievement gap. However, the study showed evidence of resistance among some educators who clearly believe that college opportunities are for a selective group and not for everyone. They also suggest a sense of prevalent deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) towards Hispanic students, which makes these teachers—and even school leaders—view them as an underclass of their own, responsible for their own successes and failures, and which removed the blame or responsibility from themselves as teachers (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Educators with deficit attitudes view low-SES, minority students as incapable of succeeding in school due to inherent familial and academic deficiencies that impede the learning process; these failures are expected, because these educators subscribe to the myth that minority students and their families do not value education (Valencia, 1997; Valencia & Black, 2002). Those with a mindset of deficit thinking therefore tend to blame the victim, rather than recognize how inadequate schooling structures have historically undermined the needs and success of minority students, and continue to do so in many cases (Valencia & Black, 2002). These deficit views can extend from teachers to the leadership at schools with low-SES, minority populations, as the research suggests that this leadership is not wholly committed to the belief that all students can succeed (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).
While these deficit views were perceptible in several teachers attending the training sessions, the majority of teachers adopted a more open attitude, and they were willing to participate actively. Throughout the sessions, we remained positive and willing to engage even those who resisted our vision, and we were able to get through to a few of those teachers who were initially dismissive of the knowledge we were trying to convey. Noticeably, some of these teachers became more receptive and engaged us in conversations on what they could do to effect changes in their classrooms, both during the sessions and after. For us, the ability to foster a recognition and awareness in those few teachers represented a highlight in our professional development project, as it indicates that change is possible, but that it takes consistent effort, time, resources, and most importantly, the commitment of the teachers to reconsider their ineffective practices. Perhaps this is also an indication of one of the first stages of change, where the minority perceives an overwhelming majority that does not share their views, and they recognize that they are going against the current and that is more effective to get on board with the collective vision, rather than remain isolated and morally and legally in the wrong.

On a more positive side, the measures being implemented on campus and being prepared for future implementation highlight the success of the professional development training and cultural transformation at hand at Southern County ISD.

Creating a position for a College and Career Readiness Advisor on campus, and hiring someone to take that position for the upcoming school year, suggest a commitment on part of the district to develop the college-going culture on campus. Access to a college advisor affords all students the knowledge and opportunities to better prepare them to seek guidance and get on the right track to successful college journeys (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). The same commitment to college-awareness and access informs the district’s willingness to participate in
the “College Seekers” pilot study, where a group of students will be selected and given the opportunity to acquire the necessary information, skills, and academic knowledge to enter and persist in college. The program also shows that the district is cognizant of the importance of creating and maintaining more parental involvement, and it seeks to develop their awareness of college and involve them in the process of their children’s education (Ingram et al., 2007; Marschall, 2006).

The development of higher standards and expectations throughout the district, and especially at the high school, is imperative for the success of cultural transformation on campus (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002). Creating collaboration between the South Texas Community College and the Southern County Independent School District represents a rare opportunity to develop considerable curriculum alignment between the high school and higher education courses, which allows the students access to advanced curricula and allows them to accrue college credit at the same time. The same effort also aligns with the growth of a college culture at the district level, with the collaboration offering test preparation and other support services for students and families, which increases their readiness for and awareness of college. This effort is an example of a successful partnership, where the local educational institutions works together to provide the necessary support and productive commitment to the other stakeholders in the community (Cooper, 2002; Cazden, 2002).

Maintaining a rigorous and relevant curriculum that is meaningful to real world experiences and that encourages engagement in the classroom in a climate of positive and valuable relationships, is also an integral part of the cultural transformation process (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2010; Swanson, 2000). The efforts in place to conduct targeted professional development with the teachers at SCHS illustrate the need to develop culturally-
relevant pedagogy in the classroom, more engaging instructional practices, and validate the students’ funds of knowledge at the same time (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The professional development for teachers, which includes training on Pre-AP and AP and rigorous content-specific knowledge, culturally-relevant teaching where instruction is related to students’ life experiences and where diversity is encouraged and celebrates, and the need to build meaningful relationships with students and their families, all nurture a culture of high expectations and authentic care that validates students’ funds of knowledge and allows them to develop higher critical thinking skills, as well as engaged learning that can only lead to success in high school and higher education (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Contreras, 2011; Howards, 2010).

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Because cultural transformation at a school is a lengthy process marred by resistance, lack of consistency, and other factors, there needs to be a follow-up evaluative process in place between the IDRA, STCC, and SCISD, to make sure that the envisioned practices and strategies are implemented and sustained. The second phase of this study will in part address these issues, as members of the IDRA will be interviewing administrators and teachers at SCISD on the changes they have experienced, in terms of culturally-relevant pedagogy, more college-awareness, increased school-parent-community partnerships, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and so on. Other recommendations for future studies include:

1. This study reflected views mainly concerning Hispanic culture, and further studies should be conducted on whether cultural components unique to other cultures could be incorporated into a college-going culture.
2. Research should be conducted on funds of knowledge, and social and cultural capital specific to different cultures. Information gained from this could be used to address deficiencies of current practices.

3. Research can also be conducted on leaders’ roles as agents of change for social justice, where leaders take the initiative to create change on their campuses, and the transformation is developed as an internal process.

4. Furthermore, research on the role of families – partnerships with communities can also be conducted.

References


