

**LATINOS AND THE CULTURE OF COLLEGE:  
HOW TO BUILD A COMMITMENT-TO-COLLEGE CURRICULUM  
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College. One word with so many paradigms. Ask any college graduate to describe a college culture in one word and you will hear ‘opportunity’, ‘success’, ‘achievement’, ‘freedom’ or ‘work’.

However, when over one hundred Latino students and parents were interviewed and asked for reactions to ‘college’, you would have heard ‘expensive’, ‘I will miss home too much’, ‘too hard’, ‘need to work instead’, or ‘our family has never gone to college’.

One word - two cultures. Webster defines culture as the ways of living built up by human groups and transmitted to succeeding generations. The Latino student in America is caught between two cultures or two paradigms when discussing college.

The first culture is the familial culture of hard work and emphasis on family unity and values. Latino parents have come from their homelands grateful to find *any* work and are prepared to live with extended family in humble circumstances to make four or five times more per hour than what could have been earned back in their home country. A lack of English skills and financial constraints tend to give Latino sons and daughters the impression that formal education is unthinkable - and Latino parents believe this as well.

However, a second culture paradigm is Latino parents and students recognize that college would be beneficial. Time after time Latino parents will speak of coming to this country for a better life for their children. Those dreams, however, are expensive, may cause debt or government involvement, and seem far from reality or experiences of the parents. So the dream hangs in the air - out there but not quite here.

These two cultures do not need to be mutually exclusive, either-or propositions. But they do not blend naturally and will not blend by chance. There needs to be a guide, a mentor, a teacher to help the Latino student and parent learn how to participate in the college dream while respecting his or her Latino roots.

Statistically it is crucial for this culture gap to be bridged. President Barack Obama, in his address to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, spoke to the decline in an educated American workforce. America has gone from the 1st or 2nd most educated society to the 11th in one generation. One out of every five workers in America is Latino yet only three out of every fifty managers is Latino (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). Why the gap? A major reason could be the lack of education!

Hispanic high school students are less likely than their Caucasian or African-American counterparts to attend education beyond high school. In its report the U.S. Department of

Education indicated that 57% of Caucasians aged 25-29 had completed some college compared to 51% of African-Americans and 31% of Hispanics (2005).

In our research, we have discovered a myriad of higher education opportunities - scholarships, government-funded access programs, and paradigm-shifting individuals and groups - that are available IF a student decides to go to college. But as Dr. Susan Choy (2001) suggests the first step is the **decision to go to college**.

To get to the decision to go to college, our educational institutions and college-access programs should base programming on a **college-commitment curriculum**. What does a college-commitment curriculum involve?

### **EVENT + LANGUAGE = MOTIVATION**

Motivation to act or react to something is determined not only by events that happen but more importantly the language that surrounds those events (Burke, 1945).

For example let's take the event - college attendance. When parents or friends talk about college as a necessary event and use words such as 'important', 'opportunity', or 'our family all go to college', then the student is more motivated toward scholastic efforts, extra-curricular activities, and other preparation to go to college. Students associate with other students that describe college in a similar way and the student becomes part of a successful college-going culture.

It looks like this: Event (college) + Language (important, necessary, opportunity) = Motivation (study, get involved, sacrifice for college). This would be a positive motivation formula!

Now take the same Event (college) and because of a Latino parent's lack of higher education, being uncomfortable with English skills, or awareness of the lack of financial resources, the language to describe college could be 'too expensive', 'not for us', 'we just are hard workers' or 'we need our children to work for money now'. Students begin to 'buy in' to this paradigm and will learn to associate with students with a similar perspective and will not try courses or activities that would promote higher education.

The formula looks this: Event (college) + Language (too expensive, not for us, no one has ever gone from our family) = Motivation (lack of extra effort to prepare for college). Motivation for going to college is negative, non-existent.

Educators and program officials cannot change the language parents use or the language in the home nor language of friends of Latino students. BUT educators and program officials can help to change the language in the schools or programs. What a difference the phrase 'when you go to college' could make in classrooms, orientations, outreach activities, or personal

counseling. What a difference the language could make if words like ‘we expect ALL students to be college ready’, ‘all students should go to some form of college’, or ‘of course, you can go to college’.

## **BLOOM’S TAXONOMY OF EDUCATION: HEAD, HAND & HEART**

For a commitment-to-college curriculum to be successful, the three main learning styles need to be incorporated into classes and programs. Bloom’s Taxonomy of Education originally established three areas of educational development: the cognitive (head), affective (heart), and psychomotor (hand) (Bloom, 1956). To get that decision to make college a part of the future from a student and parent all three areas of learning need to be maximized.

### **Cognitive (Head)**

Of course, curriculum must appeal to the logical reasons to go to college. This can include graphs on earning differences for college graduates versus non-college graduates, statistics on the healthier lifestyle of college graduates, and the vast number of financial resources available for student aid.

As important as the head is in the decision to go to college, it is crucial not to stop here in curriculum plans.

### **Affective (Heart)**

Latino students need the connection between the logical reasons to go to college and the emotional commitment to family. A curriculum that allows students to discuss personal dreams, understand obstacles, and discover resources to those obstacles will help a student feel the importance of the commitment and allow them to personalize this decision.

Commitment curriculums should be fun and involve positive, college-committed Latino students of the same age range discussing their own commitment and path to college. Latino students need to see role models that look like them and that have come from the same background culture.

### **Psychomotor (Hand)**

A commitment curriculum needs to be participatory and must maximize opportunities for students to use his/her hands. Let students write their dreams, obstacles, and resources on cards, and then encourage them to sort through the resource cards to overcome the obstacle cards. When the student makes the decision to go to college, get them to write it down along with an action step.

Finally, there needs to be something that they take home to remind them every day of their decision. Just like a wedding ring is a tangible symbol of a commitment, the student needs a token of the commitment he/she made ‘to go to college’. For example, dream catchers with the

middle feather replaced with a graduation tassel combines two strong symbols into one tangible evidence of a decision made to go to college.

By appealing to the head, heart, and hand, curriculums will help Latino students begin to bridge the college-going culture gap.

### **INOCULATION THEORY**

William McGuire (1961) introduced this theory. A curriculum can help prepare or 'inoculate' students from the negative attacks they might hear after making the commitment to go to college by introducing the obstacles of discouragement. Then just like a vaccine for a medical disease, curriculums identify language and resources your students can use to fight the obstacles.

Curriculums should not use rose-colored glasses - it should use reality and the inoculation theory to get 'real' about obstacles and the resources to overcome those obstacles. So have the students identify the obstacles they will hear (no one from our family has gone to college) and give him/her a chance to prepare a response (yes but to become a manager and help our family financially in the future I need to go to college). Help prepare students by inoculation!

### **CONCLUSION**

Designing a college-commitment curriculum for Latino students is crucial, not only for the Latino students and their family but for the country as a whole. America has slipped from 2nd place in college graduates to 11th place in one generation - with this comes the precarious economic, health, and socioeconomic foundations of our country (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

By using the three communication theories described (Event+Language=Motivation, Bloom's Taxonomy of Education, and Inoculation Theory) curriculums will help Latino students formalize decisions to go to college. A curriculum **can** unite the two cultures Latino students face - success comes from 'work-with-your-hands' to 'work-with-your-head'.

We cannot leave the decision and commitment to go to college up to chance - building commitment-curriculums in our schools or programs should be the goal of all educators.

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