The Role of High School and College Counselors in Supporting the Psychosocial and Emotional Needs of Latinx First-Generation College Students

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Latinx first-generation college students (FGCS) are a growing population faced with unique challenges for college retention and graduation. Because their parents did not attend postsecondary education, this group of college students has not inherited the social or cultural capital common to many traditional college freshmen. Both high school and college counselors are in positions to support the psychosocial and emotional needs of Latinx FGCS, which may increase successful college completion rates. This article provides high school and college counselors with (a) an overview of FGCS' characteristics, (b) information specific to Latinx culture, (c) an understanding of the college experiences of Latinx FGCS, and (d) a discussion of counseling implications for addressing the psychosocial and emotional needs of this population.

Keywords: first-generation college students, school counselors, college counselors, Latinx, retention

Although higher education is now more accessible to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, universities are still struggling with retention and graduation rates of first-generation college students (FGCS; Slaughter, 2009). In higher education, FGCS refers to students whose parents did not attend college or any postsecondary institution (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). In 2008, 15 million FGCS were enrolled in higher education, and approximately 4.5 million were from low-income backgrounds (The Pell Institute, 2008). Additionally, only 11% of FGCS earn a bachelor's degree in six years compared to 55% of non-FGCS (The Pell Institute, 2008). Moreover, FGCS are 71% more likely to leave college in their first year than non-FGCS (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017). Beyond the general challenges faced by many FGCS, including lack of transmission of cultural capital (e.g., familiarity with the dominant culture; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miler, 2007; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007), Latinx FGCS experience additional barriers to college completion such as institutional invalidation and microaggressions (Saunders & Serna, 2004; Tello, 2015). Professional counselors working in high school and college settings are in unique positions to engage with FGCS to foster a supportive transition from high school to college to degree completion. The focus of this article is to provide high school and college counselors with (a) an overview of FGCS' characteristics, (b) information specific to Latinx culture, (c) an understanding of the college experiences of Latinx FGCS, and (d) a discussion of counseling implications for addressing the psychosocial and emotional needs of this population. The term Latinx, a gender neutral term for Latina/o (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Vélez, 2016), is used throughout this article and is used interchangeably with the term Hispanic in the case of information cited from reports (e.g., by the U.S. Department of Education or the Pew Hispanic Center).

First-Generation College Students

Various studies (Lundberg et al., 2007; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Saenz et al., 2007) have highlighted how FGCS differ from the traditional non-FGCS college population. Demographically, FGCS tend to be female ethnic minorities from low socioeconomic families, and older than non-FGCS (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). The struggles that FGCS face have been well documented. FGCS are often less academically prepared, often work while attending college, are not as likely to participate in campus extracurricular activities, and have family obligations (Bergerson, 2007; Tym, McMillion,

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Barone, & Webster, 2004). FGCS also tend to lack the cultural capital that non-FGCS receive from their parents (Lundberg et al., 2007; Saenz et al., 2007). In higher education, cultural capital relates to knowledge and understanding of what it means to be in college. Additionally, this is knowledge that is acquired over a long period of time (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). For non-FGCS, parents are the most common source of cultural and social capital regarding ways to navigate academia and college life. The lack of cultural and social capital experienced by FGCS translates to a lack of knowledge about college degrees, persistence, and retention resources. Furthermore, FGCS tend to report not receiving familial support in navigating higher education (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stieha, 2010). Studies (Orbe, 2004, 2008) have begun to highlight that many FGCS also struggle with negotiating multiple identities. Being an FGCS is not the only identity that these students experience. Other personal identities, such as race, ethnicity, and class, also tend to interplay with FGCS status.

In the research on FGCS, there is a lack of understanding of the intersection of identities experienced by specific FGCS populations. Latinxs are the fastest growing and largest racial group in the United States (Passel, Cohn, & Hugo Lopez, 2011). They also are the fastest growing population accessing higher education (Santiago, Calderón Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015). In 2010, the Pew Hispanic Center reported that Latinxs enrolled in college reached an "all-time high" (Fry, 2011, p. 3). From 2009 to 2010, there was a 24% growth in Latinx college enrollment (Fry, 2011). This represents an increase of 349,000 compared with an increase of 88,000 African Americans and 43,000 Asian Americans (Fry, 2011). Although the gap in college enrollment is beginning to narrow, Latinx continue to be the least educated racial group in regards to bachelor's degree achievement. In 2010, only 13% of Latinxs completed a bachelor's degree (Fry, 2011). In 2013–2014, White students earned 68% and Latinx students earned 11% of all bachelor's degrees awarded (vs. 7% in 2003–2004). While this was a significant increase, Latinxs are still underrepresented in comparison to their percentage of the population (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). In order to provide Latinx FGCS support, high school and college counselors need to begin understanding their experiences, which can aid in increasing their college retention and graduation rates.

There are benefits of having professional school and college counselors working with Latinx FGCS. High school and college counselors can play vital roles in helping to increase the college enrollment and persistence of underrepresented groups in higher education, including low-income students, FGCS, and students of color (Bishop, 2010; McDonough, 2005; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). The retention and graduation rates for Latinx FGCS are significantly lower than traditional students' rates (Slaughter, 2009). Many universities have recognized that students of color are an at-risk group for dropping out prior to graduation (Atherton, 2014). As a result, these universities are trying to find ways to provide the best support for this population. Research on the academic performance and persistence of FGCS has increased, but there are only a few studies that focus on the psychological well-being of these students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound 2008). A deeper understanding of Latinx culture will assist counselors as they consider how to work effectively with this population.

Latinx Culture

Understanding Latinx culture can help high school and college counselors in providing culturally competent services to Latinx FGCS. In Latinx culture, there is an emphasis placed on upholding interpersonal relationships (Hernández, Ramírez Garcia, & Flynn, 2010; Kuhlberg, Peña, & Zayas, 2010). Therefore, many Latinx cultural values revolve around supporting interpersonal relationships. Although many Latinx groups share cultural commonalities, there are between-group and within-group differences (Sue & Sue, 2016). The Latinx cultural values described in this section may vary based on the individual's generational status (e.g., first-generation in the United States versus third-generation or beyond) and level of acculturation. According to Sue and Sue (2016), three-fourths

of Latinx in the United States are third-generation Americans or higher. In order to gain an understanding of some of the significant Latinx cultural values, a discussion below is provided on *familismo*, *personalismo*, *simpático*, and *fatalismo*.

Familismo

Familismo refers to family interdependence, cohesiveness, and loyalty, as well as placing family needs before personal needs (Baumann, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2010; Marín & Marín, 1991). For many Latinx, family also encompasses extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins), close friends, and godparents. The cultural value of *familismo* involves: "(a) perceived obligation to provide material and emotional support to members of the extended family, (b) reliance on relatives for help and support, and (c) the perception of relatives as behavioral and attitudinal referents" (Marín & Marín, 1991, pp. 13–14). Therefore, extended family and friends will be the first source of support for many Latinx. Seeking help from outside the family might only occur after no resources are provided by extended family and friends (Sue & Sue, 2016). Although *familismo* may be a source of support for many Latinx, it also can contribute to stress (Aguilera, Garza, & Muñoz, 2010). Family obligations and responsibilities may be placed above outside factors, such as school and work (Avila & Avila, 1995; Franklin & Soto, 2002). However, it is important for high school and college counselors to understand that placing family responsibilities above school does not mean education is not valued by Latinx students and their families. Counselors must tailor their approaches to take into account the client's cultural expectations for assisting family in times of need.

Personalismo

Personalismo refers to a "personalized communication style that is characterized by interactions that are respectful, interdependent, and cooperative" (Sue & Sue, 2016, p. 534). In addition, a focus is placed on personal interactions in relationships instead of more formal approaches (Holloway, Waldrip, & Ickes, 2009). Counselors may consider attending to rapport building as an essential building block in the first session rather than the more formal interactions associated with completing paperwork and conducting initial assessments. Furthermore, relationships are not viewed as "means to another end" (Clauss-Ehlers, 2006, p. 412); instead, the focus is on privileging a sense of connectedness and warmth over individual achievements or material success. Maintaining positive relationships is central to the Latinx cultural value of *personalismo* (Clauss-Ehlers, 2006). As a result, high school and college counselors must work on being visible on their campuses and actively engaging with Latinx students.

Simpático

In Latinx culture, *simpático* is a relational style that "emphasizes the promotion and maintenance of harmonious and smooth interactions" (Holloway et al., 2009, p. 1012). In relationships, a space is created that is personal, hospitable, and courteous (Holloway et al., 2009). Holloway et al. (2009) described *simpático* as a self-schema where "one attempts (a) to treat other people in a gracious and accepting manner, (b) to think about others as deserving such treatment, and (c) to think about oneself as the kind of person who treats others in that manner" (p. 1013). In a study conducted by Holloway et al., their findings indicated Latinx reported significantly higher simpáctico-related traits than White participants. As a result, Latinx students may not want to bring up problems that are occurring on their campuses. High school and college counselors must work on creating a safe space for Latinx clients to feel comfortable to voice their concerns.

Fatalismo

Fatalismo, also known as fatalism, refers to the belief some Latinx hold related to fate. For Latinx who have traditional cultural values, they may "believe that life's misfortunes are inevitable and feel resigned to their fate" (Sue & Sue, 2016, p. 532). Additionally, *fatalismo* is typically connected with

religious and spiritual views (Hovey & Morales, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2016). Positive and negative life events can be viewed as controlled by "divine will" (Hovey & Morales, 2006, p. 410). When seeking counseling or mental health services, Latinx with *fatalismo* cultural values may seem to take a passive approach to problems or may not appear assertive in addressing the problem (Hovey & Morales, 2006; Sue & Sue, 2016). This does not mean the client does not want to address their presenting concern or problem. High school and college counselors will need to tailor their approaches for Latinx clients who hold this cultural belief.

In examining the psychosocial experiences of Latinx FGCS, an understanding of Latinx culture is necessary. Even though there are within-group differences, Latinx college students can sometimes share common cultural values and educational experiences. For many Latinx, supporting interpersonal relationships is an important cultural value (Hernández et al., 2010; Kuhlberg et al., 2010). However, the current literature on Latinx college students brings attention to the cultural incongruence this population experiences in higher education and the negative impact it has on their college persistence (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hurtado, 1994). In addition, many Latinx college students experience racial tensions on their campus, such as racism and microaggressions, which also negatively impact college retention (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

Factors That Impact the Retention of Latinx FGCS

Latinx college students often face similar challenges as the general FGCS population. They also face barriers in terms of cultural capital, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural experiences (Delgado Gaitan, 2013; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). The existing literature on Latinx college students identified the university environment, social support, and self-beliefs as factors that impacted the retention of Latinx college students (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1996).

University Environment
Several researchers have discussed the impact a university's environment can have on the persistence of Latinx college students (Gloria et al., 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Rendón, 1994). Many Latinx college students navigate higher education by balancing their cultural upbringing and the culture of college (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hurtado, 1994). However, some Latinx students experience a cultural incongruence (i.e., lack of cultural fit between the student and his or her university), and the difficulties that arise can lead to issues in college persistence (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Hurtado, 1994). Recent studies have supported that the cultural congruency of Latinx college students is positively associated with academic achievement and persistence (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Edman & Brazil, 2009). Latinx students who experience a cultural fit with their university perceive fewer barriers to their education (Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009). According to Hurtado and Carter (1997), Latinx college students attending predominately White universities described that "feeling at 'home' in the campus community is associated with maintaining interactions both within and outside the college community" (p. 338). Furthermore, Latinx college students reported experiencing negative stereotypes, prejudices, marginalization, and microaggressions (Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000; Valencia, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009).

Microaggressions
Victims of racial and gender microaggressions have identified these as one of the most direct forms of verbal and/or physical assault (Pierce, 1995; Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014). Moreover, microaggressions are more pervasive and occur at a more frequent rate than many realize. While these preconscious or unconscious slights, insults, and degradations may seem harmless or subtle,

it is important to be aware that "the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence" (Pierce, 1995, p. 281).

Yosso et al. (2009) interviewed 37 Latinx college students attending predominately White institutions that were classified as Carnegie Doctoral/Research Universities-Extensive to understand Latinx students' experiences of microaggressions. Focus groups were completed with three to six students at a time (Yosso et al., 2009). The researchers reported that the Latinx college students in the study experienced three types of microaggressions: (a) interpersonal microaggressions (i.e., verbal and nonverbal racial insults or slights that were directed to the students by faculty, staff, and students), (b) racial jokes, and (c) institutional microaggressions (i.e., a hostile campus climate created by racially marginalized actions through a university's structure, discourses, and practices toward students of color; Yosso et al., 2009).

The interpersonal microaggressions experienced by the participants included White professors allowing for flexibility in rules with White students but not Latinx students, and Latinx students feeling their professors had low expectations for them or were uncomfortable talking to them (Yosso et al., 2009). For some of the students, racial jokes reduced their sense of belonging and decreased their participation in campus activities (Yosso et al., 2009). In terms of institutional microaggressions, some students felt they were only visible to administrators during culturally related programs on their campuses, but at other times they were neglected by administrators (Yosso et al., 2009). Moreover, the microaggressions experienced by the students led them to doubt "their academic merits and capabilities, demean their ethnic identity, and dismiss their cultural knowledge" (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 667). As a result, the students felt rejected by their universities. Yosso et al. (2009) reported that the students engaged in community-building found "counterspaces" on their campuses (student-run spaces such as campus multicultural centers, community outreach programs, or cultural floors in residence halls) where they experienced their cultures as "valuable strengths" (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 677). These findings were similar to those identified in a content analysis of Latinx college student experiences conducted by Storlie et al. (2014).

The Strengths of Latinx FGCS

Researchers have examined the coping strategies and resiliency of Latinx college students (Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, et al., 2010; Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010). Historically, the literature on Latinx college students focused on the challenges they experienced in higher education (Delgado Gaitan, 2013; Hurtado et al., 1996). However, researchers also can learn from the cultural assets, strengths, and resiliency of Latinx students (Borrero, 2011). Morales (2008) noted that a "deeper understanding of achievement processes can be attained" by examining the experiences of successful Latinx students (p. 25). Latinx FGCS have experienced success as students; they are the first in their families to attend college. Taking a strengths-based approach in evaluating the experiences of Latinx FGCS also aligns with the tenets of the counseling profession (American Counseling Association, 2014).

Coping Strategies

Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) conducted a qualitative study examining the coping responses of high-achieving Latinx college students. The researchers interviewed 11 Latinx college students attending a Hispanic-serving institution. Nine of the participants were low-income FGCS. When faced with barriers and stressors, the Latinxs interviewed in the study reported using the

following coping strategies: (a) positive reframing (e.g., staying positive through optimism and self-confidence), (b) acceptance (e.g., challenges were unavoidable and a part of life), (c) positive self-talk, (d) long-term goal setting, (e) gaining motivation from low expectations, (f) self-reflection (e.g., learning from life experiences), (g) taking action, and (h) seeking support (e.g., reaching out to family members and falling back on religious views; Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow, 2010). Although Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) did not overtly discuss how Latinx cultural values integrated into the participants' coping responses, it appears that many of the themes aligned with Latinx culture. For instance, the theme of *acceptance* had similar characteristics to *fatalismo*, and *seeking support* reflected the qualities of *familismo*.

Resiliency

Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, et al. (2010) discussed the resiliency of Latinx college students. The researchers built upon the Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) study that examined the coping responses of Latinx students. Cavazos, Johnson, Fielding, et al. (2010) reported that Latinx participants experienced the following resiliency factors: (a) goal setting (e.g., they had clear and specific goals), (b) interpersonal relationships (e.g., receiving high expectations and encouragement from family), (c) intrinsic motivation (e.g., pursing majors that would allow them to help others), (d) internal locus of control, and (e) self-efficacy (Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow, 2010). Counselors working with Latinx FGCS on the high school or college levels need to be aware of these resiliency factors so they can provide culturally competent support.

Implications for High School and College Counselors

High school and college counselors can play important roles in the college transition and persistence of Latinx FGCS (Adelman, 1999; Avery, 2010; Bishop, 2010; McDonough, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012). Counselors can provide FGCS with college information and support, which is the cultural capital that most FGCS lack. Therefore, an implication for school counselors includes identifying college-bound Latinx FGCS and tailoring college information to these students. Counselors can design interventions at both the individual and school-wide levels to use the strengths inherent in Latinx cultural norms. Counselors may consider leveraging *familismo* and intentionally design outreach programs and psychoeducation related to college preparation, information, activities, and expectations to include students' families and friends. Engaging in informal interactions and hosting events in the community (as opposed to within school buildings) may enhance participant comfort with attending events. Topics may include: (a) helping family members have realistic expectations of academia and campus life, (b) addressing the potential of students feeling isolated or stretched between campus and family life, and (c) fostering a college-going mentality by providing information on course rigor, careers, college admission, and the financial aid process.

A similar implication can be directed toward college counselors. It is important for college counselors to have a presence on their campus beyond the counseling center. In particular, they can develop and support initiatives on campus directed toward the psychosocial needs of Latinx FGCS. Thus, college counselors having an increased presence on their campus can help Latinx FGCS understand the support counseling can offer in assisting with college persistence. College counselors can time outreach, interventions, and services to target developmental windows when FGCS' identity is most salient for students—typically when entering college and when approaching graduation (Orbe, 2004). Additionally, counselors are equipped to provide social and emotional support for negotiating and navigating new and multiple identities and addressing feelings of isolation, both on the college campus and with family. When conceptualizing clients, understanding and framing cultural expressions and values as strengths is critical. For example, *fatalismo* is reframed from the

idea of accepting defeat to moving toward acceptance and using this as a strength that allows the client to move forward in new directions.

Many Latinx students also experience negative stereotypes, prejudices, marginalization, and microaggressions (Gonzales et al., 2002; Rodriguez et al., 2000; Valencia, 2002; Yosso et al., 2009) on their campuses. These experiences may lead many Latinx FGCS to question their sense of belonging on their campuses. High school and college counselors can develop and encourage initiatives supporting diversity on their campuses. Furthermore, high school and college counselors can help Latinx FGCS develop positive coping strategies for dealing with the lack of diversity on their campuses and the internal struggles that arise with their sense of belonging. Counselors should continue to maintain awareness of unconscious bias, engage in accessing diversity and advocacy continuing education, and act as allies. Adopting the habit of framing the unique cultural context of individual Latinx clients as strengths, fostering connections, and identifying culturally applicable adjunct supportive services (e.g., spiritual or religious supports) are within the purview of professional counselors.

The general consensus in college student development theory is that to successfully adjust to college, students need to break from their own culture in order to conform to higher education culture (Nora, 2001; Rendón, 1994). To address this, universities typically provide programming designed to help students adapt to and adopt the existing institutional culture (Rendón, 1994). Alternately, college counselors are in positions that can challenge the privileging of traditional assumptions and values of the academy and influence the recognition and valuing of multiple cultures and ways of being. Rather than requiring students to negotiate overt and covert norms that assume prior knowledge or familiarity with the culture of higher education, counselors can help students identify counterspaces within the institution. For Latinx FGCS, this might include connecting with diverse faculty who could serve as mentors, participating in programs from the multicultural affairs office, or participating in student organizations centered on Latinx culture and identities. Developing relationships with key members of the campus Latinx community and moving access to counseling services outside of the traditional, potentially restrictive environment of the university counseling center may enhance service access and delivery for this underrepresented student population.

Areas for Future Research

Researchers are beginning to examine the concept of cultural wealth (O'Shea, 2016; Yosso, 2005) as it applies to FGCS. Examining Latinx FGCS and the college experience from this lens fits with the strengths-based perspective inherent in counseling and provides an opportunity for professional counselors to reframe their interventions. Further research is warranted on the high school and college experiences of Latinx FGCS. All Latinx cultures tend to be lumped together. Researchers could investigate the experiences of FGCS from an ethnic-specific Latinx group (e.g., Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, or Cubans). Moreover, research could examine the counseling experiences of Latinx FGCS. Examining the counseling experiences of Latinx FGCS can help professional counselors gain a better understanding of their counseling needs. Another possible direction for future research includes examining the microaggressions experienced by Latinx FGCS; future studies need to fully investigate the impact of microaggressions on the college persistence of Latinx FGCS. The findings from these studies can help high school and college counselors understand how they can begin to address the concerns that negatively impact Latinx FGCS.

Conclusion

Latinx FGCS are a growing demographic on college campuses. However, it is clear that these students are not receiving the support needed to assist in their transition from high school to college. The psychosocial and emotional needs of Latinx FGCS are often overlooked in the literature. Latinx students who feel culturally incongruent on their campuses struggle with their sense of belonging (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). High school and college counselors have the skills to help address the psychosocial and emotional needs of Latinx FGCS. Furthermore, high school and college counselors can work together to share knowledge and bridge the gap between high school and college expectations, institutional culture, and provision of counseling services in ways that would benefit Latinx FGCS.

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