

# A Model of First-Generation Latino/a College Students' Approach to Seeking Academic Information

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*Using grounded theory methodology, we examined the experiences of first-generation Latino/a college students. Themes emerged in students' interactions with and perceptions of peers, advisors, and faculty members. A model derived from the data was developed to describe the unique ways first-generation Latino/a students sought information relating to classes, transferring, financial aid, and careers. We conclude the article with six recommendations and a discussion of how advisors might work with the Latino/a student population.*

**KEY WORDS:** adjustment to college, advisor role, culturally diverse students, decision making, Hispanic students, multicultural issues

**Relative emphasis:** research, practice, theory

Much of the literature within higher education research is focused on determining the pre-entry characteristics that make a college student successful (Astin, 1993; Braxton & Lein, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Without recognizing that some of the most commonly cited retention models leave unanswered questions about their applicability to diverse populations, practitioners sometimes assume that the extant research is applicable to all students (Torres, 2003). Among the most cited factors for retention in college is the level of parental education (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993), yet many students from Latino populations do not come from college-educated families. More research is needed to understand the experiences of first-generation college students from diverse backgrounds. This study seeks to inform practitioners about the experiences of first-generation Latino/a college students.

This study was designed to examine the question: "What processes do first-generation Latino/a college students use to gain academic information?" We attempted to answer this question by exploring the experiences of 24 first-generation Latino/a college students at four urban, commuter institutions over a 4-year period. Three case studies presented

in a companion article at [www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/Volume-TwentySix-Issue-2.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/Volume-TwentySix-Issue-2.htm) illustrate and provide background to the common themes and observations we made in the study.

## Relevant Literature

Four research areas relate to this study: the experiences of first-generation college students, the experiences of Latino/a students, academic support services and their effect on students, and cognitive development. Because we used grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the literature was also used to inform the research and assist us in recognizing and interpreting the issues that emerged from the 24 study participants.

### *First-Generation College Students*

The term first-generation refers to a student whose parent(s) did not graduate from college. This definition has been used by academic assistance programs, such as TRIO, and is consistent with the goals of our study (Torres, 2002). First-generation students tend to take fewer credit hours and are likely to work an outside job for more hours per week than students whose parent(s) were college educated (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In addition, they tend to receive lower grade-point averages (GPAs) during their first 3 years in college than their counterparts (Pascarella et al., 2004). Even though most first-generation students are less likely to be involved or live on campus, the ones who are involved derive benefits from extracurricular involvement and show improvement in critical thinking, degree plans, academic success, and cognitive ability (Pascarella et al., 2004).

### *Latino/a Students*

Latino/a students include individuals of Latin American descent (Central and South America as well as the Spanish-speaking Caribbean) who live in the United States. The context of U.S. residency provides the environment for Latino/a self-identification. While individuals in some parts of the

United States use the term *Hispanic*, we found the term *Latino/a* to be a more appropriate label (Torres, 2004).

Early in the educational process, Latino/a students are often singled out as not having the ability to succeed in college. As a result, they may internalize a sense of failure or enter college with little information about educational opportunities or financial aid resources (Martinez, 2003). Factors such as academic underpreparation, stress related to financial constraints, familial obligations, and institutional marginalization are likely to impact Latino/as' experiences in higher education (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). These factors can create feelings of mistrust of individuals in authoritative power. As a result, some Latino/as exhibit negative attitudes regarding authority figures, which can produce disagreement, conflict, and discord between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Rodriguez et al., 2000). According to Buck (2001), these observations of Latino/as are fairly new. In the past, social scientists believed that lack of Latino/a participation in higher education was the result of cultural deficits rather than oppressive environments. The conclusions drawn from the early studies have contributed to the stereotyping of this group (Buck, 2001).

Familial support plays an important role in understanding the experiences of Latino/a college students. According to Torres (2004), most Latino/a students will say that their parents support their pursuit of a college education. However, when the same students are asked if their parents understand what their life is like in college, the vast majority say "no." While families offer support, the lack of understanding from parents creates a unique situation for Latino/a college students; they must manage the cultural expectations at home while balancing what is expected of them within the college environment (Torres, 2004).

### *Academic Support Services*

Administrators commonly believe that academic support services are very beneficial when utilized by students, yet little is known about the use of academic support services among Latino/a students. The literature provides information on Latino/a students' perceptions of integral elements of success: their determination to obtain a degree, the assistance of educational opportunity programs, and counseling (Martinez, 2003). Student retention may be improved by integrating intensive academic advising with classroom assignments designed to improve cognitive complexity and interpersonal

skills (Drogo & Roundy, 1992). However, little research has been done to compare academic support approaches among Latino populations.

### *Cognitive Development*

As students progress through college, they tend to show development in their cognitive abilities (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Some students enter as absolute knowers: They believe that knowledge is "certain" and that their role as a learner is to obtain knowledge from authority. The role of peers is to relay what authorities have told them (Baxter Magolda, 1992). This trust in authority is consistent with Perry's (1970) notion of dualism as the earliest position in cognitive development. In a study exploring how Latino/a students reconstruct ethnic identity, Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) reported that students' cognitive development influences their Latino/a ethnic-identity process. Using authorities as a source of absolute knowledge, Latino/a students tend to enter college following external formulas. For some Latino/a students, educational authorities are associated with negative stereotyping. For example, one student in the 2004 study felt that her teachers did not listen to her because she had an accent (Torres & Baxter Magolda). These negative experiences are the basis for Latino/a students' distrust of educational authorities.

Understanding the interactions between students, peers, and staff is important for helping students develop to their fullest potential. Previous research implies that students tend to attribute their gains in cognitive complexity during college to interactions with peers and out-of-class academic activities (Kuh, 1995). In this study, we investigate how Latino/a college students use these out-of-class contacts.

### **Methodology**

This study was based on a constructivist grounded-theory design (Charmaz, 2000). Grounded theory allows for theory to be developed from themes that emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By allowing theory to be developed from these themes, the theories are "likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (Strauss & Corbin, p. 12).

We focused on students at urban universities. Individuals from four urban universities volunteered to participate, and Torres connected with a campus contact to assist with the data collection. Three of the institutions were public institutions, two were designated as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) and

the other institutions were predominantly White. Two of the institutions had federally funded TRIO programs, and one institution used institutional funds to maintain an academic assistance program for Latino/a students. The fourth institution was a private urban university. Only one of the institutions had a system of mandatory advising.

Torres collected data as part of a larger longitudinal study of Latino/a college students. A letter asking for volunteer participants was sent to all self-identifying Latino/a college freshmen at the four targeted institutions. In this open sampling technique, no theoretical reason is given to restrict the sample, and therefore, any student self-identifying as Latino/a met the criterion (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The initial sample consisted of 60 interviewed participants. We focused on the 29 students who remained in the study from 3 to 4 years, and we were specifically interested in the 24 first-generation students. The students in the final sample of 24 first-generation college students consisted of 15 participants who attended the HSI. Nine first-generation students attended predominantly White institutions. Fourteen of the participants were women and 10 were men. Six participants were born outside of the United States, and the remaining participants were born in the United States. The majority claimed Mexican heritage ( $n = 17$ ). The following cultures were also represented: Columbia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Puerto Rico.

Torres conducted a 30- to 60-minute individual interview with each participant. These interviews were repeated annually for 3 to 4 years; the exact number of interviews depended on when each student entered the study.

Our research team consisted of Torres and graduate students enrolled in a graduate level course in which students explored the development of college students. Torres, as the person conducting the interviews, is Latina and an immigrant to the United States. One member of our team was a first-generation college student.

Each team member read the longitudinal transcripts of interviews and then used an open coding technique to identify themes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), concepts among the cases are identified by a line-by-line analysis. Collectively, we conducted axial coding, which is the process of putting all the previously identified concepts together into broader categories. To take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data, we considered the data across the years and coded for process. This type of analysis allows for identifi-

cation of action sequences or interactions and also allows for changes to be observed in the data (Strauss & Corbin). We identified common themes that emerged regarding how first-generation Latino/a college students gained academic information, and we considered how this process changed over time. By working as a research team, we assured consistency in the analysis. Each team member served as an inquiry auditor during the analysis phase, which provided a level of trustworthiness in the analysis as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to Lincoln and Guba, potential partiality can be addressed by the various team members.

## Results

The major themes that initially emerged from the data were as follows:

1. Students failed to recognize advisors as authority figures.
2. Students in this study consistently relied on information from peers, pamphlets, or staff with whom they had built a personal relationship.
3. Students who changed their pattern of information seeking had experienced dissonance, which for some was negative.

These themes reverberated throughout the 24 individual student interviews.

From the behaviors and beliefs expressed by the students in this study, we created a model to illustrate the process used by first-generation Latino/a students in gaining academic information (see Figure 1). This model is based on the assumption that when first-generation Latino/a students first enter college they lack information. For example, they may not know in which classes to enroll. The students then look to peers or pamphlets for advice. They do not seek an advisor for any of four reasons: They are waiting to be told information by an advisor, view seeking out an authority figure as a risk, do not wish to experience feelings of discomfort or looking foolish, or do not recognize advisors as expert authorities. For example, a student who illustrates this model might register for classes based on information suggested by his or her peers or gleaned from pamphlets. Then an academic crisis occurs for the student because he or she did not have all the information needed. In one case, a female student missed taking a necessary prerequisite course and was required to take a course over the summer. The cognitive dissonance she experienced helped her decide that peer and pamphlet advising did not work. This outcome prompted her

to seek out an advisor’s assistance in navigating the college environment. Thus, she initiated a new process of seeking information.

The situations of Maggie, Vanessa, and Nora illustrate the model; the full case studies can be seen at [www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/Volume-TwentySix-Issue-2.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Journal/Volume-TwentySix-Issue-2.htm). Maggie illustrates the second phase of the model. She relied on peers and pamphlets for advice and did not seek out an academic advisor, who could assist her in making decisions. She had not experienced cognitive dissonance, thus she has not changed her behavior since her first year of college. Vanessa and Nora are examples of students who travel through the entire model during their college experiences and have now changed their information-seeking behavior. They each experienced an academic crisis, which caused the cognitive dissonance necessary for them to take more responsibility for getting information. Because of this dissonance, they each found an advisor and initiated new information-seeking processes.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The data from this study indicate that a traditional approach in which students are trusted to know where to seek help and to trust authority figures is not likely to serve first-generation Latino/a students. The data illustrate that Latino/a students do not automatically trust authority. Their reluctance could be a result of previous negative encounters with people in authority or a lack of understanding for identifying legitimate authorities. In either case, trust must be earned by any authority figure before first-generation Latino/a students will see that person as helpful.

Our information-seeking model demonstrates the process first-generation Latino/a students experience as they work with advisors. When students

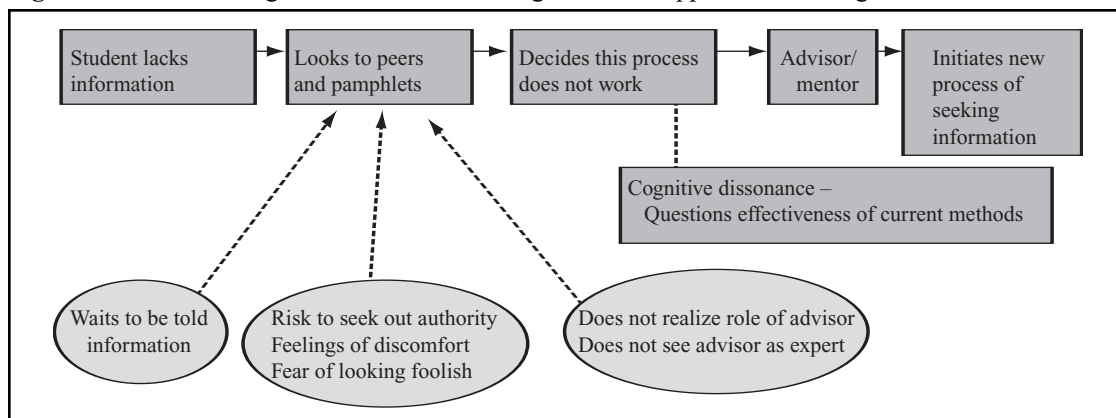
take the steps outlined in the model, they waste time and experience frustration in their college careers. As a result of this research, we recommend six strategies for working with first-generation Latino/a college students. Advisors

- should understand the unique aspects of this student population.
- need to seek out this population of students rather than expect them to come on their own.
- need to define clearly their roles to these students and communicate the shared responsibility involved in an advisee-advisor relationship.
- need to build a trusting relationship with the students.
- should eliminate the runaround.
- should consider involving Latino/a families in the advising process if the student feels it would help. This can be part of the process that helps to define the advisor’s role and to build a personal student-advisor relationship.

Advisors will benefit by recognizing the unique way first-generation Latino/a college students utilize peers, pamphlets, and other outside resources to gain information. These students are finding alternative ways to seek information and if the advisor does not act, this process may not change. While speaking about her negative experience, a student in the study reflected on the actions she wished she had taken and offered this advice: “Give [advisors] your background. Tell them about your rude experiences. Tell them that you don’t want to go through that. You actually want to get [the advisor’s] help.”

The first-generation college students in this study did not go to advisors until they reached the point of cognitive dissonance, but with knowledge

**Figure 1** Model of first generation Latino/a college students’ approach to seeking information



of the process, the academic crisis that precipitates the dissonance can be avoided. Mechanisms that can prompt the dissonance to occur earlier rather than later should also be considered. The three students at the institution who were required to see an advisor experienced dissonance more quickly than did the students at institutions that did not require advising before registration, and they changed their behaviors before experiencing major negative consequences. In addition to intentional mechanisms, interventions focused on cognitive development will assist students in evaluating their own behaviors as well as making good choices.

The students in this study did not initially recognize advisors as authority figures. Because of this, the students did not actively seek out advisors. Instead of waiting for students to experience academic crises, advisors should be proactive in developing a relationship with these students. They should make contact with them when they first arrive on campus. This will help first-generation Latino/a students recognize advisors as authority figures.

As a result of clearly defining the roles of advisors, students can begin to recognize their expertise. These students are not seeking advisors mainly because they do not recognize them as authorities (i.e., people with helpful knowledge to share). By understanding advisor roles, students may be more likely to understand the reasons they should consult with advisors.

Students in this study frequently sought advice from trusted peers. In most cases, the peers' backgrounds and experiences were similar to those of the information-seeking students. This is an important characteristic to consider in selecting and training peer advisors. Every attempt should be made to have peer advisors be representative of the students they will advise.

Advisors need to create a trusting student-advisor relationship with first-generation Latino/a students. Often the students seek out their friends because they view them as trustworthy. Advisors need to create a sense of trust with their students, which happens through frequent contact and time investments in the advisor-student relationship. This effort needs to come from the advisor because the students are not going to seek out advisors. While advisors are building this trust, students must learn to assume their responsibility for building and maintaining the relationship, factors that should be considered when defining the advisor's role.

To help clearly define the advisor role and to create personal student-advisor relationships, advisors and other college administrators should

eliminate the runaround. By being ineffectively directed to various offices, these students learn to distrust college officials. The runaround makes the role of the advisor unclear, and it makes the student hesitant to continue seeking advice and services. Advisors can open doors for students by calling ahead or by having students escorted to an unfamiliar campus location.

As part of building an advising relationship, advisors need to consider involving families in the advising process. According to Torres (2004), Latino/a students rely heavily on their families. By asking about the possibility of involving the students' families, the advisor will have a greater chance of succeeding with the student and will create a greater sense of trust, which in turn will more clearly define her or his role as an expert authority.

### Conclusion

The small number of participants and the contextual nature of this qualitative research design may limit generalization of this study's findings. At the same time, this data collection procedure yields a richer, contextualized understanding than does a typical survey of a large number of students.

Many advisors and readers will likely identify with the description of the Latino/a participants in this study. They may feel and think the same way these students felt and thought. Even so, advisors must be careful not to assume all students are the same. As these students learn about the culture of academe, advisors must accept the culture from which these students come.

First-generation Latino/a college students navigate the college environment in a unique manner. They do not recognize advisors as expert authorities, so they rely on peers and pamphlets to gain information. Their choices of information sources may eventually lead them to an academic crisis. It is only at this point that these students seek out advisors. These academic crises can be avoided, however, if institutional stakeholders are proactive and understand the process used by these students.

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