

Academic Advising with Hispanic Students

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Hispanic students face many challenges upon entering higher education leading to graduation rates much lower than the national average. In 2007 about 43 percent of Hispanic students graduated from a college or university in six years or less. This is compared with 58 percent of their white counterparts who graduate in the same time span. Despite this discrepancy, Hispanic students account for a growing number of students in undergraduate higher education (Nealy, 2009). One possibility that may help increase Hispanic student success in college is academic advising. Barh (2008) suggests that academic advising is helpful in facilitating student success. Thus, it is likely that focused advising with Hispanic students will promote success in higher education.

In working with Hispanic students, academic advisors have many components to take into consideration. They must not only account for the common anxieties countless first year students face such as transitioning, homesickness, and feeling overwhelmed, but many Hispanic students are confronted with cultural barriers. These obstacles may include language difficulties, lack of resources, and/or extreme financial hardships. With these additional elements, many more components need to be taken into account by academic advisors who are working with Hispanic students.

When working with Hispanic students, it is essential that academic advisors develop a rapport and genuine understanding for the needs of their advisees. These students enter higher education with a number of overwhelming barriers and additionally face personal feelings of uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Additionally, although they may realize they are not ready to take on the academic rigors of college, Hispanic students do not want or need to hear the rhetoric from academic advisors about being academically prepared. Instead these students want

direction and a path from which they can be successful (Reed, 2007). In order to offer this road map for success, it is essential that there is a trusting relationship established between academic advisors and the Hispanic students they are working with. It is only once the advisor and the advisee both recognize this reciprocal nature of advising that they can move towards an authentic bond from which both parties can benefit.

Pertinent to this relationship is that the advisor is culturally competent concerning Hispanic students. Cultural differences may cause rifts if the advisor is not sensitive to the influences that are most important to a Hispanic advisee. "For Hispanic students, family is often the No.1 priority. So significant is their commitment that many students often will forgo the opportunity to earn an associate degree if it threatens the family's ability to sustain itself" (Reed, 2007). Ironically however, Hispanic families encourage their youth to attain a college degree. Yet, even if the student chooses to attend a college or university, their family's well being has a large affect on their retention.

Another area of concern for Hispanic students is financial security. It is important that academic advisors recognize this concern and acknowledge the ways it may affect Hispanic advisees. Finances are a key factor in higher education persistence, especially for Hispanic students who report that finances are a major concern to them. Similarly, The National Survey of Latinos Education reports that Hispanics say the 'cost of tuition' and the 'need to work and earn money' are two of the largest contributing factors to students not matriculating at all, or not finishing once they start (Bagnato 2005). Additionally, the possibility that students move from full-time enrollment to part-time enrollment is more likely when students are supporting themselves. Therefore, academic advisors will need to collaborate with the student, who is most

likely working at least one part-time job, to develop a curriculum that is both manageable as well as beneficial.

With the increase in national attention surrounding Hispanic students, action needs to be taken to ensure their success. Morton College, considered the most Hispanic-friendly school in the Midwest, has implemented a multitude of programs focusing on Hispanic students. The programs include marathon registration sessions along with publications in Spanish and English. This action helps to increase retention rates of their Hispanic population. For these students, personalized but efficient advising begins at registration. These marathons place an emphasis “on providing a registration process that facilitates student success with the promotion of college programs and support systems” (Navarro & Waiwaiole, 2008). Taking this into consideration, academic advisors should primarily focus on building rapport with students prior to progressing towards academic advising. Upon conducting advising, advisors must consider the many factors that influence the lives of Hispanic students including their confidence in their own skills, the ability to focus on academics if the financial situation allows, and the support from family members. These key issues must remain in the forefront for any academic advisor working with Hispanic students.

The factor pertaining to familial relationship is at the forefront of Hispanic students transition to college. Traditional culture in the United States expects students to push away from their families and become more independent. College is considered a time for individuals to focus on themselves. However, this is less likely to be the full experience of Hispanic students. The Hispanic culture's central component of familismo instills in members a focus on the family, both nuclear and extended, that is maintained through multiple generations (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin & Perez-Stable, 1987). The tension created by the differences between the

two cultures puts unique stresses on Hispanic students. College advisers need to understand the challenges these students face as well as the support system provided by the Hispanic culture and utilize strategies to help these students succeed.

While Hispanic students often face a variety of challenges as mentioned previously, those stemming from strong family ties can present unique stresses. Hispanic culture nurtures close familial ties and interdependence resulting in students feeling a strong commitment to their family. Even in exploring the independence and autonomy encouraged by the college experience, they may view their growing self-sufficiency less as personal development than as easing a burden on the family. Hispanic students lessening dependence on the family frees resources for other members (Sy & Romero, 2008). However, students may still feel a responsibility to contribute to the family with both time and money. Students are likely to be in close contact with siblings to see how they are doing, offer encouragement, and serve as a role model (Sy & Romero, 2008). Where many other students might expect significant financial support from their families while attending college, Hispanic students often work while attending school and send money home to assist with funding needs. This is an important aspect of Hispanic culture that can influence the student-advisor relationship in college.

Although students feel a sense of obligation to their family, Hispanic families can also be a source of strong support for students. Hispanic culture values education and students may see a college degree as a way to help their family overcome poverty. Although many of their parents are not able to help in traditional ways due to low levels of education and language barriers, students may be inspired by what their families have overcome and strive harder to succeed (Zalaquett, 2006). Being a role model for other family members and having strong community

support can also facilitate success (Sy et al., 2008, Zalaquett, 2006). It is important for advisors working with Hispanic students to be aware of the supportive nature of the family.

Ong, Phinney, and Dennis (2006) found ties between Hispanic college student success and parental support along and the student's strong ethnic identity. Students who have a mature understanding of their Hispanic identity are better prepared to navigate higher education. They may have a stronger sense of themselves and their culture. This provides a framework for decision-making and results in students making better choices. Again, this is a nuance that can support academic advisors who are working with Hispanic students.

These examples show how important it is that academic advisors understand the influence of the family on Hispanic students and their cultural concept of familismo. Leveraging the positive aspects of motivation and support, advisors can help Hispanic students succeed. Acknowledging the challenges these students often face through a strong commitment and sense of responsibility to family is paramount for building trust and helping students navigate higher education while staying true to their roots. In addition, considering the ethnic identity development of each student will affect an understanding of the student's individual challenges and resources. Advisors working with Hispanic students will want to consider these factors and show respect for the student's native culture as they facilitate success in college. Acknowledging the potential challenges, developing successful coping strategies, and assisting students in making connections to others in similar situations are all ways in which advisors can support these students.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) recognize the unique role of family for Hispanic students. They work to engage the entire family, both in support of the student and in support of the community, realizing that the information given to a family may be disseminated in the

community to help others. Involving parents in orientation programs helps them understand the challenges their student will face and helps them begin to understand the expectations of the institution. HSIs are also facilitating peer groups that provide an in-school network of support and are exploring innovative ways to support students such as a case-management approach involving multiple offices on campus (Santiago, 2009). Academic advisors can learn from the HSIs approaches when working with Hispanic advisees.

Overall, academic advisors have an important role in guiding and facilitating Hispanic students through the challenges they face in college. Establishing a relationship built off trust is paramount. Additionally, aspects of familial connection and obligation should be at the forefront of academic advisors relationship with Hispanic students. Other cultural considerations to be considered by academic advisors are self-confidence and financial concerns. Although these are recurring themes among Hispanic students, it is always important to keep in mind the wide range of individual variation and adapt interactions accordingly. An academic advisor who can adequately account for these cultural components will be able to most successfully facilitate their Hispanic advisee's persistence in higher education.

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