Addressing Barriers Confronting First-Generation College Students from Hispanic Families

First-generation college student = the first in an immediate family to attend an institution of higher education. According to a 2011 College Board study, one third of 5-17 year olds in the U.S. are first-generation students – 61% of those being Hispanic/Latino.

Although the term Hispanic is a controversial one, we use it here because it is widely used in reporting demographic findings. This term is used to cover such diverse groups as Cubans, Colombians, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Guatemalans Hondurans, Mexicans, Peruvians, Puerto Ricans, and Salvadorans. Hispanics are widely dispersed across the U.S.

According to the Pew Research Center, Hispanics are the nation's largest minority group representing 16.4% of the U.S. Population, and this population subgroup is on the rise. At the same time, they are largely under-represented in higher education. Recent national data indicate that they are just 12% of the higher education population and that 50% of these are first-generation college students (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). The under-representation is related to a variety of economic, academic, social, and emotional challenges encountered in preparing for post-secondary education and experiences encountered after admission that result in dropouts.

The Challenges

All students encounter challenges on the way to higher education. Among those experienced by many first-generation Hispanics are secondary schools that do not encourage and prepare them for higher education and families with extremely limited incomes. In addition, there are cultural and familial considerations. And some students must overcome barriers related to their undocumented status.

> As one first-generation Hispanic UCLA student shared with us: *The competition around post-secondary education is quickly growing. College preparation is becoming increasingly demanding. It is not only necessary to maintain a flawless GPA, but many students are struggling to juggle academic, extracurricular, and leadership demands. The finances needed to excel academically are quickly growing.*
>
> *The cost of these academic obligations is a burden for many Hispanic families. Students often do not want to add to their family's financial struggles by taking an accelerated class that requires numerous books and technological equipment. Some students feel discouraged to push themselves academically when they know the struggles their parents/guardians deal with at home. In particular, living in a home that can barely afford to provide food on the table becomes very distressing when trying to achieve an elevated form of education.*
>
> *Some students seek employment to cope with the costs of college preparation. Too often, however, the lack of appropriate financial support results in too many first-generation students experiencing the hope of going on to higher education to be unrealistic.*

Financial Barriers Related to Schooling Costs

According to the Pew Research Center, Hispanic households as of 2010 have a median yearly income of $40,000 – with 25% of these households at the poverty level. In many families, funds for schooling are sparse. Free preschool opportunities (e.g., Head Start) are limited and so many Hispanic children are deprived of early school readiness experiences. K-12 public education increasingly has many "hidden" financial costs (e.g., school and athletic uniforms, laptops, advanced placement course materials and exams, extracurricular activities). With respect to higher education, there are college entrance exams and application fees. In low income families, a young person may find that the need to bring in an income outweighs academic pursuits.

Difficulties with Familial Support

In keeping with Hispanic family values, it is common for young people to live with their parents into – and sometimes beyond – early adulthood. Youngsters are expected to contribute to family needs (e.g., chores, caring for younger siblings, bringing in income).

Traditional Hispanic culture defines male and female roles in a family in the following manner: Men are the "bread winners." Young males work alongside their fathers doing yard work and house maintenance and often must find employment to help provide for the family. Females are "caregivers." Young females work alongside their mothers in the kitchen preparing food for the family, cleaning, and caring for siblings. For the young, academic pursuits often are not factored in. Moreover, it is not uncommon for parents to be reluctant about encouraging their youngsters to venture out into the world of higher education, fearing that it will loosen family ties.

Hispanic youth living under such conditions find it difficult to consider higher education as an option. Those who do usually have limited family support. And, having made a decision that can increase hardships at home, such students may experience feelings of conflict, shame, and guilt. In some instances, parents may feel the student's decision to seek higher education is selfish and reflects a lack of respect or appreciation for the family; they may even feel it is an indication that the youngster is ashamed of his/her background.

Furthermore, throughout K-12, problems often arise related to family involvement with the school. In some Hispanic families, parents experience language, cultural, and work barriers. Those students who do strive and demonstrate academic success may find that the barriers to family involvement at school result in families not being introduced to higher education's value and opportunities. This plays a role in whether a youngster is encouraged to pursue higher education.

Not Enough Roles Models and Transition Supports

Knowing that a small percent of Hispanics pursue higher education can be discouraging. There are too few role models and not enough peer encouragement. Moreover, the transition to college is difficult and calls for effective transition supports. Despite the available guidance from counselors and teachers, first-generation students often need additional guidance and support in preparing for college, making the decision and then applying, commuting, and adjusting to the changes and demands once admitted. As one first-generation student commented: "I have learned many things by trial and error, something others do not have to go through. I had no one to tell me what it was like, what to expect, or what to watch out for."

<div align="center">

A Few Examples of What Schools Currently Do Related to Preparing First-Generation Students for Postsecondary Education

</div>

Policy makers have established a variety of supports and special programs that are intended to overcome challenges and support successful transition to postsecondary education and careers. A perspective on prevailing policies related to enhancing equity of opportunity for postsecondary education success can be garnered by reviewing the various ways the federal government is

involved. A reasonable place to start is with the Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education – http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/hep.html. For a brief overview of recent programs from this Office and from other federal departments, see the Center's report entitled: *Interventions to support readiness, recruitment, access, transition, and retention for postsecondary education success: An equity of opportunity policy and practice analysis.* (http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf).

> In general, we find prevailing policies primarily support broad-band, direct strategies to enhance engagement in preparing for and succeeding in postsecondary education. The focus is on *limited* interventions for
>
> - cultivating early attitudes, a college going culture, and readiness
> - recruitment outreach, including involvement on K-12 campuses of postsecondary institutions and K-12 students coming to postsecondary sites
> - financial aid such as fee waivers, scholarships, and loans
> - first-year transition programs including welcoming and support networks
> - academic advising before the first year
> - monitoring to provide further advice, learning supports and special assistance when problems are noted.

Available evidence highlights that such direct strategies are useful in increasing the pool of applicants for postsecondary education, improving transitions, and enhancing retention, but evidence also suggests that the prevailing set of interventions is insufficient for enhancing equity of opportunity.

Below are a few examples of K-12 efforts:

ESEA programs. For students who come from economically disadvantaged families, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (recently reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act) provides supports (e.g., Title I, Title III). However, these supports tend to be planned and implemented in fragmented ways and remain inadequate for meeting the nature and scope of need.

Curriculum and course design. In general, school districts align curriculum and courses so that students can meet the requirements for college admission and prepare for admission testing. However, there is considerable variation among and within schools with respect to encouraging, guiding, and supporting students, especially those from low-income, "minority" families. Some public schools have on-site college counselors available to students throughout the academic year to help students plan and prepare for higher education. They also implement college-geared events for the school (e.g., college nights/fairs).

Advanced coursework opportunities. While not offered at all schools, Advanced Placement (AP) courses (e.g., for English literature, calculus, biology, chemistry, European history) are designed to provide high schools students with insights into college level learning and opportunities to accumulate college credits. Exposure and completion to such rigorous courses can build confidence. Schools usually assign higher weights to grades for AP, and this can enhance a student's GPA. The credits also can shave off length of time to degree (cutting down the financial burden) or can free up time so that students can take elective courses of special interest in place of introductory courses. According to the College Board in 2007, about 12,037 public high schools offered AP coursework. Relatedly, some public high schools collaborate with community colleges to enable students to take supplemental/affordable courses and earn college credit. This helps high school students financially (e.g., they pay a discounted price or just the cost of study materials). Success in AP and community college courses improves acceptance to college.

Regional Occupational Programs (ROP). Where available, ROP also allows high school juniors and seniors to add to their resumes in applying for postsecondary education and careers. Such programs provide opportunities for students to take occupation-oriented, hands-on courses and explore career interests. Some courses offer special certifications of completion.

Fee waivers. Fees for college prep exams can be a significant hurdle. With increased competition for college admission, students are taking more and more such exams. College application fees also can be a considerable financial burden. To address these barriers, waivers can be sought by those who qualify. For example, the College Board offers PSAT fee waivers for juniors who are unable to pay test fees themselves. The schools' role is to identify eligible juniors from low-income families and request fee waivers on their behalf. A high school Assistant Principal recently indicated that in the 2015-2016 school year, waivers allowed all of the 9th and 10th graders at her school to take the PSAT. This enabled those students who otherwise couldn't afford the costs of the PSAT to better prepare for the SAT. Similarly, the National Association for College Admission Counseling offers application fee waivers. The waivers are intended for the schools to which a student is most interested in attending (e.g., the association recommends no more than four). Some colleges and universities do not allow for fee waivers.

For more discussion and some specific recommendations related to interventions to support postsecondary education readiness, access, transition, and retention, go to
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf.

Embedding First-Generation Student Postsecondary Education Concerns into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Student and Learning Supports

As is widely acknowledged, the factors interfering with the success of first-generation students are complex, and complex problems require comprehensive solutions. Prevailing policies have led to fragmented and marginalized interventions that focus on specific subgroups of students and problems, downplay commonalities of need, and connect with relatively few students. On the one hand, first-generation students and their families raise special concerns for schools. On the other hand, many of the concerns overlap with those of other subgroups of students who require student and learning supports to enable them to succeed at school.

> While there is considerable agreement about an array of interfering factors, debates continue about what interventions are most effective. As a result, policies and practices continue to reflect a combination of limited planning, traditional wisdom, adaptation of commercial marketing strategies, and insufficient financial support.

Using the lenses of equity of opportunity and social justice, our analyses suggest the need is for policy that can guide development of a much more comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system of interventions. That system should begin preK and continue in a fully interconnected way through postsecondary graduation and focus is on enhancing equity of opportunity.

From this perspective, interventions to address concerns associated with first-generation college aspirants and many other subgroups of concern at schools can be embedded into a broad framework for enabling success at school. This does not mean ignoring or marginalizing any subgroup. To the contrary, the point is to directly address common underlying factors interfering with students benefitting from good instruction and pursuit of postsecondary opportunities and to do so in a way that avoids fragmentation, redundancy, and counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

4

To do this effectively, schools need to embed such concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports. This includes enhancing how regular classrooms enable motivational readiness and capability for postsecondary education, improving supports for transitions, and responding to and, where feasible, preventing student personal crises.

For all this to happen requires fundamental systemic changes. And fundamental, large scale systemic changes require expanding school improvement policy and practices from a two to a three component framework and strategically developing a sophisticated operational infrastructure for school, home, and community collaboration. These essential changes will enable schools to transform their student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system that fully embeds plans for addressing the needs, rights, and well being of all students. (See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf and http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html.) Developing such a system is a public education, public health, and civil rights imperative.

Concluding Comments

As concerns are raised about enrolling and retaining first-generation students in higher education, the solution is not just to provide another set of special initiatives, programs, and services. It is simply is not feasible or necessary to *separately* address the needs of every subgroup of students. To do so, increases the fragmentation of interventions and produces sparse benefits.

The job of schools is not just to ensure that the needs of a particular subgroup are met. Available data clearly indicate that at every stage in the progression from pre-K-16, too many students in every subgroup are falling by the wayside. The reality is that schools are confronted daily with multiple, interrelated neighborhood, family, schooling, peer, and personal problems that require multiple and interrelated solutions.

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, it increasingly will be the responsibility of states and districts to ensure that public education effectively plays its role in addressing the elusive goal of creating equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and beyond. Given the deficiencies of current approaches, the call is for new directions that move toward transforming how schools address the problem of ensuring *every* student succeeds in transitioning to postsecondary education and a career.

References and Resources Used in Preparing this Document

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2006a). *The implementation guide to student learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

Balemian, K., & Feng, J. (2013). *First generation students: College aspirations, preparedness and challenges*. New York: College Board. http://research.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/publications/2013/8/presentation-apac-2013-first-generation-college-aspirations-preparedness-challenges.pdf

Barrow, L., Brock, T, & Rouse, C.E. (2013). Postsecondary education in the United States. *The Future Of Children, 23*(1), 3-16. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. http://www.futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/23_01_01.pdf

Center for Mental Health in School (2014). *Cultural concerns in addressing barriers to learning.* Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cultural/culture.pdf

Center for Mental Health in School (2011). Notes on transition planning for college. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/transitiontocollege.pdf .

Center for Mental Health in School (2010). Interventions to support readiness, recruitment, access, transition, and retention for postsecondary education success: An equity of opportunity policy and practice analysis. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA. http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf

Center for Mental Health in School (2007). *Schools, families, and community working together: Building an effective collaborative*. Los Angeles: Author at UCLA.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/buildingeffectivecollab.pdf

Chapman University (2015). *Are you a first generation college student?* Orange, CA: Author.
http://www.chapman.edu/students/academic-resources/first-generation/index.aspx

Chaudry, A. & Fortuny, K. (2010). *Children of immigrants: Economic well-being*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. http://www.urban.org/publications/412270.html

College Board (2015). *First-generation students*. New York: Author online.
http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/prepare/first-generation

Crosnoe, R. (2010). *Two-generation strategies and involving immigrant parents in children's education.* Washington, D.C.:The Urban Institute. http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=412204

Engle, J., Bermeo, A., & O'Brien, C. (2006). *Straight from the source: What works for first-generation college students.* Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. http://www.tgslc.org/pdf/files-sfts_what_works.pdf

Fortuny, K., Hernandez, D.J., & Chaudry, A. (2010). *Young children of immigrants: The leading edge of America's future. Brief 3*.Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
http://www.urban.org/publications/412203.html

Generation First Degree-Pico Rivera (2015). *Why it matters*. Los Angeles: Author.
http://g1dpicorivera.org/why-it-matters/

Greenfield, P. M. (2006). Applying developmental psychology to bridge cultures in the classroom. In S.I. Donaldson, D. E. Berger, & K. Pezdek (Eds.), *Applied psychology: New frontiers and rewarding careers.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Klopfenstein, K., & Thomas, M.K. (2009). The link between advanced placement experience and early college success. *Southern Economic Journal, 75*(3), 873-891. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27751419

Liu, M.C. (2011). *Investing in higher education for Latinos: Trends in Latino college access and success*. Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures.
http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/TrendsInLatinoSuccess.pdf

National Conference of State Legislatures (2014). *In-state tuition and unauthorized immigrant students.* Washington, DC: Author.
http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/in-state-tuition-and-unauthorized-immigrants.aspx

Peguero, A. (2009). Victimizing the children of immigrants: Latino and Asian American student victimization. *Youth and Society, 41*, 186-208.

Pew Research Center (2012). *The 10 largest Hispanic origins groups: Characteristics, rankings, top counties.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/06/27/the-10-largest-hispanic-origin-groupscharacteristics-rankings-top-counties/

Pew Hispanic Center. (2013b)*. Second generation Americans: A portrait of the adult children of immigrants.* Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center.
http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2013/02/FINAL_immigrant_generations_report_2 7 13.pdf

Portes, A. & Rumbaut, R.G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Portes, A. & Zhou, M. (1993). The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 530*, 74-96.

Reid, M., & Moore, J. (2008). College readiness and academic preparation for postsecondary education: oral histories of first-generation urban college students. *Urban Education, 43*(2), 240-261.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085907312346

Rickles, J., & White, J. (2005). *How many high school students satisfy the UC/CSU eligibility requirements after four years?* Los Angeles. LAUSD Program Evaluation And Research Branch.

Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch., C., Greenfield, P. & Quiroz, B. (2001). *Bridging culture between home and school: A guide for teachers.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations and San Francisco: WestEd.

U. S. Department of Education (2009). *Implementing RTI using Title I, Title III, and CEIS funds.* Washington, DC: Author. http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/rtifiles/rti.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (2012). *Results in brief: National evaluation of Title III implementation: Report on state and local implementation.* Washington, DC: Author. http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/state-local-implementation-report.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (2015). *Financial aid and undocumented students.* Washington, DC: Financial Aid Office. https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/sites/default/files/financial-aid-and-undocumented-students.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (2015). (2015). *Many non-U.S. citizens qualify for federal student aid.* Washington, DC: Financial Aid Office. https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/eligibility/non-us-citizens

U.S. Department of Education (2015). *Title I - Improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged.* Washington, DC: Author. http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html

The White House (nd). *The Dream Act: Good for our economy, good for our security, good for our nation.* Washinton, DC: Author. https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/DREAM-Act-WhiteHouse-FactSheet.pdf