

Perceived Obstacles in College Attendance Amongst Middle School Students

Lydia Bell & Darold Joseph

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association,
April 2012, Vancouver, BC

Background of Study

- Qualitative methods to probe middle school students' understanding of the obstacles perceived in attending college. Study explores what factors, actors, or experiences have led them to construct these obstacles
- Participants were MS students enrolled in a mentoring program that paired them with undergraduate mentors from the local university (N=57), and were enrolled in 5 public middle schools in Tucson, Arizona
- 68+% of the students across the 5 schools qualify for FRL, and 90% are non-Anglo, of which the majority (74.7%) are identified as Latin@
- Semi-structured interviews, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, open & line-by-line coding

Findings

- *Cost of College—Family Finances*: messages that family cannot afford to send child to college
- *Cost of College—Inability to Qualify*: fear that in filling out financial aid application materials they may “out” their undocumented status, or a parent’s, prevents them from believing they can apply for financial aid
- *Grades—Misperception of grades needed*: believes that one needs all As to go to college
- *Grades—Self-efficacy*: doubts scholastic abilities, believes teachers dislike them or don’t believe in them
- *Lack of Information—Family*: do not know from whom they can get college information; mainly seeking information from family, express that families often do not have this information
- *Lack of information—Major choice*: express concern that they don’t know “right” major to pick, focused on economics behind such decision making
- *Family Support*: having to care for, or work to support, their families would make it more difficult to be successful in college; others explained that it would *prevent* them from enrolling in college

Conclusion

- Many obstacles were shaped by participants' social networks that had limited college information, and observations of others' struggles to balance pursuing education and maintaining financial stability.
- Witnessing family experience extreme financial struggles shaped the belief of some that they could not afford college, while for others it instilled pressure over selecting a college major that would yield economic opportunities.
- Many already see their futures as a pathway of choices with economic strings attached to each decision, & therefore discussing post-secondary ed. as an economic investment might be a salient hook.
- Demonstrates how important it is for middle school counselors & others providing college outreach to these students to assess what these students already know (correctly or incorrectly) about the college process in order to provide them with the most salient information, rather than just trying to elevate their interest in higher education
- Highlights how much these students look to their families and broader social network to discuss post-secondary education. As such, it is important to include families in programs promoting college access, in order to reinforce this message both inside and outside the home and community.
- Finally, we must be aware of the financial realities and pressures low-income youth are facing. Middle school students are acutely aware of their families' financial struggles, economics plays a salient role in their decision-making, and they have a keen desire to contribute to their families as soon as possible.