

Parental involvement in college planning: Cultural considerations when working with African American families

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The purpose of this article was to describe Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model and emphasize the predisposition phase of the model as the starting point for school counselors' efforts to help African American parents foster their children's college planning in the college choice process.

Design/methodology/approach

– The authors wrote this manuscript as a conceptual approach to helping school counselors work with African American parents in their children's college planning process by including two case studies as examples.

Findings

– This is a conceptual article.

Practical implications

– School counselors should be culturally competent and aware of how African Americans rear their children to help them successfully navigate college planning. For example, school counselors can learn about and share information with families about colleges that have support programs assisting African American students toward college completion.

Originality/value

– This paper is important to the field of education as it contributes to the literature regarding how school counselors can assist students in becoming college and career ready by working with their parents using a college choice model.

Keywords: African American | Education | Equity | Race | Parent | College planning

Article:

Introduction

A college education is the pathway to career attainment and economic success. Individuals who have a two-year or four-year college degree on average make higher salaries, have a reduced risk of unemployment and enjoy greater career mobility (Baum et al., 2010; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). A college education is also linked to better mental and physical health, closer family relationships and more civic engagement (College Board, 2011). Thus, it is important to help all interested students attain this goal for their own benefit and the improvement of our society.

Many parents struggle to achieve the goal of getting their children into college. Some African American students and their parents, for example, may not have the social capital to know how the college planning process works (Bryan et al., 2011). Environmental factors, such as being first generation college students or having lower socioeconomic status, also may play a role in African American students' college choice, given the absence of resources and networks usually available in middle- and upper-middle-class families that support decisions to attend college (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Solorzano and Ornelas, 2004). Giving focused attention to these students is important because African Americans are underrepresented in higher education, although more African Americans are now attending college (Kaba, 2010; USA Census, 2012). In 2009, African American students represented 14 per cent of college students while their Caucasian peers represented 62 per cent of students enrolled in college (USA Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

To increase the number of African American college students, attention to parental involvement in middle and high school is critical. In fact, research indicates that parents' expectations that their children will attend college is the greatest influence on students' expectations of attending college and actually enrolling in college (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000a, 2000b; NPEC, 2007). Parental involvement is a more powerful influence than parents' educational level and student academic achievement. Importantly, this conclusion holds true across a range of families: all race/ethnicities, all socioeconomic groups, advantaged and disadvantaged (Bergerson, 2009; Kern, 2000). Some African American parents, especially those with limited education and low incomes, may doubt their ability to assist their children with college planning (NPEC, 2007). Indeed, they often do not have access to information or tools needed to help their children make a decision to go to college due to limited social capital (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000a). Instead, they may assume school personnel, especially the school counselor, will provide their child with the assistance needed to get to college. Unfortunately, their children often attend schools with limited resources related to college planning, including fewer and less well-trained counselors who must focus on tasks other than college counseling (Bryan et al., 2011). In addition, African American parents and their children often experience school personnel as unavailable (NPEC, 2007) or, even worse, perceive that teachers and schools counselors do not see their children as college bound (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). Thus, while increasing parental involvement in their children's college planning is vital, there are many instrumental and attitudinal barriers to this goal.

Our goal in this manuscript is to address these barriers and offer culturally relevant suggestions for school counselors seeking to increase African Americans' parental involvement in college planning. Our goal is in line with the ASCA National Model (American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012), which emphasizes the role of school counselors in collaborating with parents, sharing resources and information as well as assisting parents in developing pathways to help their children become academically successful and prepared for post-secondary opportunities. First, we describe Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, highlighting important parental involvement behaviors within each stage. We emphasize the first phase of the college choice model (i.e. predisposition) as we believe this is when school counselors can have the most impact on parents and their children in deciding and preparing for college. Then, we report cultural considerations of African American families that counselors need to consider and, through two case studies, illustrate how school counselors can utilize culturally relevant information to work with African American families.

College choice stages

The role of parents in college planning is described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987; and elaborated in Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000b), who created a college choice process model that is the most widely known and cited model of college decision-making (Bergerson, 2009; NPEC, 2007). The three stages of this model, predisposition, search and choice, begin with students deciding whether college is suitable for them, then looking for the right fit and finally choosing which college they will attend. Within each stage, parental involvement is described in terms of both parental encouragement, which includes psychological components such as communicating parental expectations and aspirations, and parental support, behavioral components such as going on college visits and saving for college (Hossler et al., 1999). Although each stage includes other influences, such as peers and school personnel, for the purposes of this article, we focus on parental involvement in briefly describing the three stages.

During the predisposition stage (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000b; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987), typically sixth to ninth grades, students decide whether education beyond a high school diploma is suitable (and attainable) for them. Parental influence is greatest during this stage. In fact, the idea of considering college is usually initiated by the parent (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Murphy, 1981). Parental encouragement at this stage is motivational; it involves parents having high expectations and frequently communicating these expectations to their children. Parental support behaviors include being involved in school in ways that support college expectations (e.g. making sure their children are enrolled in advanced math and science courses), saving for college and visiting college campuses with their students.

During the search stage (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000b; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987), typically 10th through 12th grades, students develop "choice sets" of college characteristics that are important to them, such as affordability, college major and career interests, campus environment and reputation of the institution. Students' choice sets are heavily influenced by parental encouragement, primarily through the "signals" parents send about their own preferences, thus directing their students' attention to specific characteristics and/or colleges. At the same time, parental support behaviors reinforce these messages through taking the child to visit colleges within the choice sets and assisting the child in understanding various requirements (i.e.

SAT/ACT, grade point average and early decisions process) for admission to colleges in the choice sets. More importantly, parental support involves collaborating with school personnel (e.g. middle and high school counselors and teachers) to ensure that their child's educational requirements are met for successful entry into college, attending financial aid workshops and continuing to save for college.

During the choice stage (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000b; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, 1987), typically in the 11th and 12th grades, students apply to college(s) and then make a college enrollment decision from their choice sets. At this point, parental encouragement and parental support around finances have a particularly strong influence on students' decisions, but parents' encouragement to attend a particular type of college or a specific college (e.g. the parents' alma mater) can sway a student's institutional choice (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000b). In reaching an enrollment decision, parents also help their children in what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) called the courtship phase of choosing a college. An example of the courtship phase includes the process of reading through the outreach efforts of colleges (e.g. personal letters from a dean or student affairs office, scholarship awards or invitation to join an honors program).

College choice considerations

Although informative around the roles of parents in college planning, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has been criticized as reflecting primarily the college choice process of white middle-class families who have access to resources necessary for making an informed college decision (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Perna and Titus, 2004; Smith, 2009). Many African American parents, however, lack the social capital enjoyed by some middle-class parents, including college experience, high-resourced schools, financial assets and ongoing communication with their children's teachers and counselors. As a result, for many African American families, college access (i.e. the predisposition phase) must be addressed before college choice can become an option. Thus, outreach programs to these parents are critical to their involvement in their children's college planning. Importantly, such programs must not only provide the college knowledge and resources that many of these parents lack, but they must also be culturally relevant (Perna and Titus, 2005; Tierney, 2002).

Unfortunately, outreach to parents in general appears to be minimal (e.g. one parent night per year) (Tierney and Auerbach, 2005). Often, college planning services for parents are treated as "add-ons" rather than a central focus (Yamamura et al., 2010). Parent-focused programs that reflect "cultural integrity" are even rarer (Tierney and Auerbach, 2005, p. 43). On-going, in-depth programs that emphasize parents and that are family-centered "appear to be vital to the college knowledge of their participants" (Tierney and Auerbach, 2005, p. 44), and are particularly critical for underrepresented parents such as those in African American families. Such programs need to be personalized and based on culturally specific knowledge (Tierney and Auerbach, 2005). In the following sections, then, we provide culturally specific knowledge needed by counselors to enhance the involvement of African American parents in the predisposition phase of their children's college planning, and then offer some specific suggestions for creating programs for these parents.

Culturally specific knowledge

African American parents teach their children to have an achievement orientation (Hill, 2003; West-Olutunji et al., 2010). Many want their children to have post-secondary aspirations so that they will become economically successful and gain access to more opportunities than previous generations had. Therefore, African American parents encourage their children to do well in school by having discussions about academics and social issues (Stewart, 2007).

Many African American families have used strategies and tools relevant to the African American culture to overcome barriers and challenges, especially when it comes to the success of their children. For example, the church plays a significant role in the African American community and has been known to be a hub for spiritual renewal, galvanizing political and social action, as well as providing pertinent information, such as resources, regarding education (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2005). Specifically, leaders (i.e. pastors, ministers and other clergy) of the church are often consulted by African American parents for advice and information concerning the academic, behavioral, career and college welfare of their children (Bradley et al., 2005; Lipford-Sanders, 2002), and thus are key resources for forming a predisposition to attend college.

Similarly, extended family and fictive kinships are vital to African American parents, as they rely on these relationships to transfer various types of capital (e.g. cultural and social) to help understand the college-going process and to close resource gaps (Tierney and Corwin, 2005). For example, parents may seek information from a family member or close friend who has completed college to get insight about how to prepare their child for college and attain culturally relevant scholarships. Extended family and friend networks are often seen as a pipeline of resourceful knowledge that African American parents may not receive from their child's school (e.g. teacher and school counselors). Utilizing the father or a male role model in the family to promote education or college in the African American community helps African American students move toward academic success and college readiness, especially for African American males, given the link between father's education and academic success of African American males (Hines and Holcomb-McCoy 2013). African American males with college experience can serve as mentors and catalysts to promote post-secondary education.

African American parents use racial socialization as a protective factor to teach their children about the social injustices they may encounter, given the historical nature of bias, racism and prejudice against blacks in the USA (Coard et al., 2004; Cooper and Smalls, 2010; Friend et al., 2011). Racial socialization is the act of communicating positive messages about the African American race, culture and ethnicity, as well as teaching children about the differential treatment African Americans receive in the USA (Hughes et al., 2006, McHale et al., 2006). Injustices range from seeing or hearing stereotypical messages about African Americans through different media outlets to low teacher expectations of African American children, all of which can limit predisposition to pursue higher education. Given the experiences African Americans encounter in the USA (i.e. racism, inequality and differential treatment); some parents bolster their child's identity through communicating positive messages about the African American culture and instilling a sense of pride about black history (Greif et al., 1998; Mchale et al., 2006; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). For instance, some African American parents and their children may watch television shows such as *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, which portray African Americans in a middle-class lifestyle, as well as African Americans engaging in the college experience, take their children to black history museums and attend Afro-centric festivals and

performances. The empowering messages from these activities help African American children develop positive self-esteem and high regard for themselves as potential college students.

Last, when considering whether college is a good option, African American parents and their children assess the true value of college in terms of the cost-to-benefit ratio of a college degree relative to other post-secondary options (Freeman, 2005; Smith, 2009). Specifically, parents want to know if a college degree will translate into a higher paying career, a better lifestyle and other benefits (e.g. health benefits) that give a profitable return on their investment in their child's education (Freeman, 2005). Parents who do not have the finances to pay for their child's college education may influence their child to delay college and work as a method of financing college and avoiding student debt.

Below are two case studies integrating some of this culturally specific knowledge relevant to African Americans and providing suggestions for school counselor responses.

Case study 1: Henry

Henry is a 13-year-old African American male in the eighth grade whose parents do not have any education beyond a high school diploma. Henry loves his physical science course and desires to be a chemist. In his spare time, Henry goes to the library to read books about various science topics. In addition, Henry's school counselor, Mrs Smith, notices his ability to excel in math and science courses and decides to meet with Henry to discuss his academic career. She encourages him to keep his grades up and asks him what he knows about college. Henry tells his counselor that his parents did not attend college but they talk about his interests in science and school frequently. Mrs Smith calls Henry's parents to talk with them about placing Henry in a math and science magnet high school next year and creating a four-year plan toward college enrollment; she asks to meet with them in person. Henry's mom notifies Mrs Smith that she does not have transportation to the school and thus relies on other parents who live in her neighborhood, as well as her son, to get information from the school. Henry's mother also expresses her concerns about Henry's ability to succeed at the magnet school because he would be one of a few African American students in a 95 per cent Caucasian student body. The magnet school is located in a fairly affluent area and accessible by car only. Mrs Smith recognizes the mother's concern and schedules a meeting with Henry and his mother at their church, in their neighborhood, to formulate a plan for his educational trajectory. At the meeting Henry's mother informs Mrs Smith that she wants her son to do well and attend college and talks about George Washington Carver, a successful African American scientist who overcame many challenges during a time of intense, overt racism, as a role model for Henry. Mrs Smith talks with Henry's mother about giving him a bi-weekly assignment of writing a one-page reflection on an African American who was a scientist as a way to continue his predisposition toward the field. Also, she suggests asking Henry to share his reflection with his mother during dinner as a way to continue dialogue pertaining to successful African Americans. Mrs Smith recommends Henry and his mother continue this activity at the magnet school as strategy to empower Henry given the demographics of the magnet school. Next, Mrs Smith explains to Henry's mother the process of applying to the magnet school and covers the four-year plan to keep Henry on the college track. Mrs Smith shows her the four-year course of study and a timeline for taking achievement tests (i.e. ACT/SAT) and applying for college. Mrs Smith notices Henry's mother is a little overwhelmed,

so she empathizes with her by letting her know that many parents have this feeling. She offers to set up a meeting with Henry's future high school counselor at the magnet school.

After adjourning with Henry's mother, Mrs Smith reflects on her meeting and notices that other parents in Henry's community are not able to visit their child's school for various reasons, but discovers many of them attend Henry's church, which seems to be a central gathering place for the residents. Mrs Smith calls the pastor to arrange several meetings at the church so that she can talk with parents about their children's needs and better inform them about academics and college planning. As a result, Mrs Smith establishes a pipeline for getting information to Henry's mom and the parents in their neighborhood, as well as assisting Henry's mother in keeping her son on track to college.

Case study 2: Jasmine

Jasmine is a sophomore at Pronto High School, a magnet school located in a predominantly Caucasian affluent community. Jasmine lives with her mother, father, one brother and two sisters in a working class "blue collar" community. Jasmine's parents both have one year of vocational training, as her father is an auto mechanic and her mother is a licensed practical nurse. Jasmine aspires to attend college and wants to become a chemical engineer but is having trouble understanding how to be prepared for college and the engineering field. In addition, Jasmine's high school is predominantly white because of redistricting of school zones as a mandate to incorporate more diversity at Pronto High, which has been classified as a magnet school for science, technology and engineering. The school population is 1,200 and 200 of those students are African Americans from her neighborhood. Most of her classmates have conversations around college planning that intimidate Jasmine. For example, Lucy, one of her classmates, plans to attend Balfour State, a well-known STEM University, because her father is an alumni and sits on the board of trustees. Lucy tells Jasmine she is sure she will get into Balfour because of the courses she is taking, her father's contacts in admissions and her legacy status. Lucy asks Jasmine what college or university she plans to attend, given her aspirations as a chemical engineer. Jasmine responds by naming a university in their state but quickly changes the subject to a topic around homework. However, Lucy notices Jasmine's hesitation and responds, "You probably don't know because the people from your neighborhood just work menial jobs and want to be rappers". Jasmine responds to Lucy by telling her that many of her community members are small business owners, teachers and nurses, and that she is proud of her neighborhood and her heritage. She also tells Lucy to visit her neighborhood as opposed to believing the messages she receives from her white peers and the evening news about her neighborhood. After this conversation, Jasmine reflects on the interaction and becomes angry about the situation. As a result, Jasmine seeks the advice of her parents on how to deal with this situation and asks that they discuss a plan to get to college. Jasmine's parents remind her of the racism and bias she may encounter as an African American, particularly in environments where she is in the minority both in race and socioeconomic status. Moreover, they encourage her to continue to be proud of who she is, as she has a rich history of African American leaders, such as Shirley Chisholm and Rosa Parks, who were resilient in the face of hatred and bigotry.

Mr Johnson, a Caucasian male who is the sophomore school counselor, overhears the incident between Jasmine and Lucy and decides to mediate the two of them. After the mediation, Mr

Johnson reaches out to Jasmine's parents and discovers they are disturbed by this conversation; he suggests meeting with concerned parents. He travels to Jasmine's neighborhood not only to meet with Jasmine's parents but also the other African American parents on his caseload at local restaurant. Jasmine's parents explain the situation to Mr Johnson and tell him their high expectations for Jasmine academically, including their intentions for her to attend college. Other parents report their children have encountered same situations. In addition, the parents explain how they socialize their children to know these incidents take place for African Americans and how to cope with them. Mr Johnson acknowledges their achievement orientation toward their children and offers to help the parents with college planning. Once Mr Johnson gets back to school, he commends Jasmine for dispelling the myths about her community and praises her for her high self-esteem and her resilience against such crass messages.

Mr Johnson plans a series of meetings with the neighborhood parents to discuss the courses their children need to graduate from high school. He develops a list of colleges suitable for each of his students' individual career trajectories and researches the completion rates of African Americans at each institution. He considers arranging a Saturday group tour at two nearby colleges for the parents and their children, one an historically black college and university and one a predominantly white institution, as he knows Pronto graduates at both institutions who could address parents' questions about on-campus life for African American students. Mr Johnson sets himself a schedule for checking with each parent every quarter around their children's academic standing and to give them any new information on financial aid, admissions criteria and other relevant information for college. He also sends regular reminders (via the automated school messaging system) that the parents should contact him if they have any questions. As a result of Jasmine's encounter with Lucy, Mr Johnson has made great strides to ensure his African American parents have access to the information needed to prepare their children for college.

Discussion

When working with African American parents and families, school counselors need a knowledge base of African American culture and family dynamics, as well as the racial socialization of black students, to strategize ways for these parents to assist their children in developing interests in and pursuing post-secondary pathways. Using the first case study, Mrs Smith understood that Henry's mother could not get to the school so she used the church as a meeting place and then as a central location to meet all parents from that neighborhood, believing that bringing them together would help build a community of support around college-going for the students and the parents. School counselors should utilize local churches or community centers to reach African American parents who lack access for coming to the physical structure of the school, or target parents who do have transportation to relay information about college preparation and ask advice about how best to reach other parents in their neighborhood. School counselors can work with parents as early as middle school in encouraging predisposition to college, as early preparation is critical to be sure students take the necessary high school curriculum. Ideally, school counselors can build trust and strong working relationships with all parents and their community stakeholders to provide resources and support for family and community networks (ASCA, 2012).

The role of a school counselor is to promote systemic change by addressing student achievement issues, therefore understanding their school culture and the learning environment for African American students (ASCA, 2012). School counselors are in a great position to create a career and college-going culture in their schools (NOSCA, 2010). Collaborating with teachers and other school personnel to work with parents to create accessible pathways to college and identify students' academic strengths and interests can increase college aspirations of African American students (ASCA, 2012, NOSCA, 2010). For example, school counselors can collaborate with teachers on informing parents about the classes their children need to take to be college ready. Higher level educational courses (i.e. Advanced Placement, Honors or IB) are usually required to compete for slots in various colleges; however, the demographic make-up of these courses are often Caucasian and affluent, which could make it difficult for a student like Henry and Jasmine to thrive. To note, in 2008, 108,500 African American students participated in Advanced Placement course exams compared to 949,986 white students (Aud et al., 2010). Therefore, school counselors should counteract these environmental challenges by helping African American parents discuss with their students know about the many successful, notable African Americans or college graduates from their school who overcame numerous obstacles and barriers to make a substantial contribution, and informing students of their ability to do the same. For example, school counselors may invite notable African American college graduates back to the school for a college panel for parents to discuss the successes and the barriers to attaining to getting in and graduating college. Further, parents of these college graduates can join them to share with parents the process of getting their children into college. In addition, school counselors can teach parents how to advocate for more access to rigorous courses by helping them navigate the educational pipeline.

As in the case study involving Jasmine, school counselors must acknowledge that race plays a role in how African American families and students experience the college going process. School counselors should use their counseling skills to validate and empathize with parents who must protect their children by insulating them from the realities of racism and bias. School counselors can use racial socialization as an asset by helping African American families use additional strategies such as African American television shows that promote positive messages and encouraging parents to engage in more Afro-centric activities. For example, parents can take their children to a black history museum and having discussions with their children about other African Americans who overcame challenges to attend and complete college. Additionally, school counselors should be culturally competent and aware of how African Americans rear their children to help them successfully navigate college planning. For example, school counselors can learn about and share information with families about colleges that have support programs assisting African American students toward college completion.

Conclusion

As Gandara and Bial (1999, p. 30) stated:

The experience, knowledge, resources, and expectations of parents play a significant role in the kinds of choices that students make. Students with equal ability make very different decisions about their post-secondary education based on the guidance – or lack of it – that they receive from home.

Clearly, school counselors should work with parents of African American parents to help them understand their role in the college choice process, especially during the predisposition phase. More importantly, school counselors can create accessibility to college for this population by understanding the cultural dynamics of African American parents and using these as resources to reduce barriers and create successful pathways to aid their children in navigating the college process. Understanding the unique ways African American parents encourage their children is necessary for helping them influence their children's decisions about college enrollment. Although the list of considerations provided above are by no means exhaustive, it is a starting point for developing strategies to empower African American parents and give them the tools needed to get their children into post-secondary institutions. As a result, a shift from "issues of choice to issues of access" (Bergerson, 2009, p. 6) should be a guiding principle for enhancing outreach to these parents.

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