Deferred Enrollment: Chicano/Latino Males, Social Mobility and Military Enlistment

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The lack of high school graduation and college enrollment can lead to limited prospects for career and college, leaving many with an uncertain future. For some Chicano/Latino males, choosing the military is an avenue to increase their access to needed training and benefits (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). With these structural barriers in mind, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the various factors that lead Chicano/Latino males to enlist in the military after high school graduation instead of matriculating into college. Results showed that students viewed the military as a way of upward social mobility and their most viable career option after completing high school. The study also highlights the lack of resources available to students who may not be viewed as college material by school personnel.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What sources of information do Chicano/Latino males have to formulate their post-graduation plans?

2. What factors influence the decision for Chicano/Latino males to enlist in the military after high school completion?

3. How do schools structure opportunity and support for Chicano/Latino males?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Limited information exists about why Latino male students opt to enlist in the military over college (Huerta, 2015). Huerta (2015) found military recruiters provided simple information and guaranteed benefits to students, unlike counselors who can only provide estimations of aid. The limited contact between Latino males and counselors impacted students' perceptions of what career paths were possible in the future and caused students to feel more comfortable taking advice from military recruiters given their frequent contact with them. The causes for Chicano/Latino students interest in military enlistment remains a largely disputed issue. Further research on the reasons for military enlistment among Chicano/Latino male students is necessary to better understand the nuances of this phenomenon.

Academically, Chicano/Latino male students have underperformed as a group. School practices such as tracking into special education or remedial education and excessive discipline limits the opportunities that Chicano/Latino males have in schools (Huerta, 2016; Martinez, Fernandez, Perez, & Montes, 2016). While students may persist in high school all the way through graduation many are unprepared to enter the workforce or college due to structured and organizational limitations. What further complicates the college-going process for high school students and their relationships with counselors is that young men are less likely to seek support from school counselors (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009), and what we present in this article is a nuanced understanding of the interactions between Latino males, high schools, and counselors.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We draw from the following theories; school withdrawal, stage—environment fit, and social capital, to understand the experiences of Chicano/Latino males' decision to enlist in the military after high school graduation.

First, Finn's (1989) theory of school withdrawal embeds two different components for explaining causes that lead students to leave school early. A part of the theory of school withdrawal is the frustration-self-esteem model that argues that early frustrations begin for students by consecutive low-performance. Repeated underachievement in school performance can lead students to develop low self-esteem which can lead to behavioral problems. The second component is the participation-identification model. The basic premise is that participation in school activities is essential to have positive academic outcomes. Second, Eccles et al. (1993) stage—environment fit theory argues that the alignment between middle school students' developmental needs and the educational environment play a significant role in students' perceptions of self and motivation to succeed academically. If students fail to develop a sense of belonging, students can be quickly marginalized and placed into tracking systems that may prevent them from being academically successful during their high school years (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007; Oakes, 2005). Finally, social capital is about the relationship of the individual or group to a system, and how those systems interact to share or limit the exchange of information. Building positive and supportive relationships with counselors and school agents becomes imperative for increased school engagement and academic success for Chicano/Latino students (Khalifa, 2010).

Collectively, these theories identify the individual and organizational overlap and can help explain how Latino males may begin to consider other opportunities outside of higher education as a form of upward social mobility. We advance the use of this conceptual framework by centering Chicano/Latino males as they reflect on their social and academic experiences in high school.

FINDINGS

Each participant shared rich perspective and insight about their lives and what sociocultural factors influenced their decision to enlist in military service after completing high school. As the participants described their high school experiences and involvement, a wide range of activities and

experiences emerged. We focus on four themes that provide a nuanced understanding of what familial and institutional factors influenced their trajectories. First, the high school as an institution and the cultures that existed within their schools played a significant role in their development. All the participants reported their schools as having two separate cultures, a majority non-college-going culture and a small and exclusive college-bound culture. Second, students generally had a lower-level of valued social capital and their behavior, attitude, and decisions were influenced by their peers who had similar social networks. Third, participants felt that the military would help them fulfill gendered expectations from their family. Finally, participants believed the military was the best option for upward social mobility as it would help pay for college in the future and give them job training opportunities that were not otherwise available.

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms the need to continue to understand what factors shape career choices for Chicano/Latino male students and expand research beyond students who may be inclined to go to college. The common themes that emerged among participants warrant the need to form a research agenda around military enlistment of Chicano/Latino and other male students of color. Researchers must continue to explore counseling practices at schools that often exclude a majority of their student body. School leaders must think of ways to expand the services for students who may be in regular or developmental courses to ensure that they are prepared to transition after high school. Schools must figure out ways to support the needs of Chicano/Latino students and ensure that they are successful beyond high school. Knowing that athletics is often the main form of engagement for Chicano/Latino males, athletics presents an opportunity for schools to engage and support the aspirations of students. Finally, as educators, we must begin to think of how to engage all students academically and not just those that show academic promise. As the participants showed, while they were not the most successful students during their high school years, they did have the motivation to succeed in life and thus pursued the military as they felt it was their best way to achieve upward social mobility.

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