

January 2003

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Recommended Citation

Figueroa, Guadalupe (2003) "A Charla With my Mentor," *Culture, Society, and Praxis*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp/vol1/iss2/4>

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A charla¹ with my mentor

by Ma. Guadalupe Figueroa

Understanding the influence of traditional and constructed cultural values in the effectiveness of mentoring relations with first generation Chicana/Latina students

Introduction

“One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, “What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and papers? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back” (Cisneros, S. 1989, p.110).

Cisneros' character Esperanza reflects a commitment most Latina/o students have to obtaining an education and going back to work in their communities. Esperanza's desire to go back echoes Villalpando (1997) research which finds that, “Chicana/os, in comparison to white students, begin their first year of college with a stronger commitment to specific life goals and values that are related to an other –orientation, and continue endorsing these same life goals and values several years later at a greater

rate” (p,16). In similar ways, the responses of Latina students of Mexican descent I interviewed for this research coincides with the description of Chicana/o students' altruistic values described by Villalpando (1997) and Delgado Bernal (2001) as “a commitment that translates into a desire to give back and help others” (p. 632).

However, as Delgado Bernal (2001) remarks, the “commitment to families and communities can be a heavy emotional burden students carry on their shoulders” (p. 633). For this reason, I consider mentor and peer-mentor support as essential academic and personal devices for Latinas/Chicanas that help these students cope with feelings of loneliness in their efforts to become allies to their communities.

Recognizing the importance of mentors and peer-mentors, the present research studies the influence of traditional and constructed cultural values in the successful development of academic and personal mentoring relationships with first-generation Chicana/Latina college students. My analysis identifies ways in which formal and informal mentors manage cultural practices such as the use of language,

¹ The word *charla* in this research refers to an informal conversation between two or more people.

spiritual values, and behavioral practices to develop positive mentoring relations with their mentees.

An example of a cultural value that shapes mentoring-relationships with Latina students is the concept of *respeto*, which cannot be translated simply as “respect.” Socialization in Latino communities is based on traditional values of *respeto* for human dignity and people’s identities and values. As Albert (1996) states, “we are brought to believe that individuals must show *respeto* for the other person’s culture and value their language.” I remark on the importance of understanding cultural values from an insiders’ point of view because, as Albert (1996) warns, “intercultural misunderstanding can occur for two reasons: (a) people expect the same behavior in the target culture that they find in their own culture and (b) the same behavior can be interpreted differently in two culture.”

Therefore, if mentoring relationships are based on clear understandings of cultural values, then mentors will have a better understanding of their mentees’ academic and personal goals and develop successful relationships. This idea is supported by findings in my

preliminary research (Figueroa, 2002). “*La capacidad empática² del mentor* (mentors’ empathetic capability) is the most important skill to develop successful mentoring relationships” (p.15). *La capacidad empática* provides mentors with the ability to reach a better understanding of their mentees’ perspectives and goals. However, since most of my interviewees shared common backgrounds, I recommend further research to detect if individuals who do not share common backgrounds similarly recognize this capability.

In addition, I recommend further research to determine if empathetic skills can be acquired through mentors’ training, or if there are factors that can be identified to contribute to the development of *capacidad empática* amongst cross-cultural mentorship. At this time, I will focus my research in providing data to measure the importance of a mentor’s empathetic capability in the development of

² The Spanish term *capacidad empática* refers to the mentor’s ability to correlate with the student’s cultural, academic, and social life experiences. Thus, the use of the term *capacidad empática* instead of “empathetic capability” responds to an attempt to distinguish its meaning and not confuse it with the meaning of the English word “Empathy,” which can also mean sorrow or pity.

successful relationships between mentors and Latina students, particularly Latinas of Mexican descent.

Mentor's background and definition

Mentoring literature (Luna & Cullen, 1995) recognizes that “for years, business and industry has applied the philosophy and principles of mentoring to attract, retain, and promote junior employees, and mentoring has improved the individual and corporate performance and effectiveness.” Translating the concept of mentoring into higher education, Terrell and Hassell (1994) explain that “effective mentoring increases a student’s sense of integration and involvement by teaching interpersonal, social, intellectual, and communication skills” (p.36). Similarly, Stromei (2000) warns that “a major element in a retention program for African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian students is the individual support and guidance provided by mentors” (p. 55).

Likewise, Kram (1980, 1985) provides a detailed and precise definition for the roles mentors play in terms of two functions. The first function is career mentoring, “where the mentor

sponsored, coached the individual, as well as gave exposure, visibility, and protection. The second function is psychosocial mentoring, where the mentor serves as a role model, counselor, and friend” (Welch, 1997, 43).

In this research, I define career mentoring as a formal type of mentoring. Teachers and academic counselors provide this type of mentoring. Psychosocial mentoring functions as informal mentoring. Family members, friends, and college provide this type of mentoring. An example of psychological mentoring provided by family members of my interviewees took the form of encouragement to attend and remain in college. One of the interviewees, who I am going to call “Barbara”, commented:

I have friends, [I have] my mother's support, I have a mentor. Even though, my mom taught me to don't give up. She didn't go to college. She briefly finish grade school, but that doesn't matter because she's been there and she has show me not to give up, not to give up in whatever I am doing, to keep on going because there always ways to do whatever I wanna do. And my friends, they help me get up whenever I'm feeling I wanna to give up and they're there to lift me up to tell me “you need to go on”. And even though like my mom has taught me this, but there's times when one can't

avoid, you know just thinking oh that I can go further, this is where I wanna stop. Even though they don't know they're mentors, they are, it is just very helpful to have friend like that. (Barbara- Freshman)

The example above illustrates how friends' and mentors' support is essential for student retention in higher education. Barbara mentions that her mother's lack of formal education limited the type of mentoring she provided her. Barbara's case reflects the situations many Latino parents face when mentoring their children. Latino parents offer emotional support but can provide only limited guidance for their children's academic success. Academic support is as important as the emotional support students need in college. Friends provide academic guidance and play the role of informal peer-mentors.

Formal and informal mentoring constantly overlap with each other, but both are equally important for Latina students. The reason to distinguish between them is to acknowledge the fact that not all college students require or have the same access to the type or mentoring they need.

For example, a student whose parents have a college education might not have

the same need for academic mentoring as a first generation college student. Since parents of the first-generation college students do not have an ample academic history, the academic guidance they provide to their children is more limited.

I point out in preliminary research (Figueroa, 2002) that a common characteristic in the academic experiences of first generation college students is the great influence of informal mentors in Latina students' decision to pursue a college education. Family emotional and spiritual support combined with the academic guidance from a teacher, a counselor, or a friend played a crucial part in their decision to continue their studies. This information is key to understanding the importance of the support and guidance of a mentor in the lives of Latina first generation college students. However, it is even more important to identify the factors that make such relationships successful.

An interesting factor in successful mentoring relationships is the affiliation of students with individuals who share common cultural values. Villalpando's (2002) qualitative research states that "the affiliation of peer-groups of

Chicana/o students has a positive influence in the students' academic and personal life". Villalpando (2002) also states, "the concept of *cultural resources* is a set of cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and values, which, among other things, nurture and empower individuals who associate with the group" (p. 4). This concept of cultural resources "draws from the work of progressive scholars who have reconceptualized traditional sociological and anthropological deficit theories of culture, language, class, gender, and ethnicity/race, in order to provide more robust and valid explanatory frameworks for research in education and the social sciences."

Another concept that describes the affiliation of students with people who share cultural values is *community funds of knowledge*. This concept resembles the set of nurturing family characteristics identified by Gordon (1995) in his anthropological review of studies of African American culture (4). Being able to culturally relate to a mentor accelerates the success of mentoring relationships.

Therefore, in the development of mentoring relationships with

Chicana/Latina students in higher education, cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds should be taken into consideration. As Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) explain, "even though Latinos [/as] have high educational aspirations, they do not persist until graduation. Currently, Latina/os have the lowest level of educational attainment than any racial and ethnic group in the United States. Some of the causes that scholars have identified as being the main reasons that explain the paucity of Latinas/os in higher education are cultural incongruence, lack of supportive university environments, financial and socioeconomic issues, educational stereotypes and a lack of mentors".

Research Objectives and Methodology

This research focuses on the role mentors play in the college experience of two Latina first generation college students that I had previously interviewed for preliminary research in this topic. The students' names were changed to protect their confidentiality. I analyzed the transcribed interviews of these two students utilizing the approach of Latina Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). My objectives were to identify these

Latina students' own definitions of "mentor", as well as the influence of their traditional and constructed cultural values and traditions in the effectiveness of the academic and personal mentoring they received at their university.

Also, I used the *counter-storytelling* method of LatCrit theory in order to analyze issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Espinoza, 1990, Garcia, 1995; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997, Johnson, 1998; Montoya, 1994, Delgado Bernal, forthcoming, in Villalpando, 2002) that emerged from the comparison of the analysis of the transcribed interviews and the literature review. The story that was written for this research was based mainly on reflections upon the literature review and the interviews conducted with students. I must warn that further research on this topic is needed to define what characteristics other Latina/o students look for in a mentor and the influence of the students' and mentors' cultural values in the positive development of mentoring relationships.

LatCrit Theory: Definition

In understanding how LatCrit analyzes the educational experiences of

Chicana/Latina students, as well as to understand how the cultural values of Chicana/Latina students contributes to the development of mentoring relationships with family members and college peers, I borrowed Solorzano and Yosso's (2001) description and objectives of LatCrit theory in education to analyze my reading and interviews:

- A LatCrit theory in education is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which *race and racism* explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and disclosures that affect people of color generally and Latinas/os specifically.
- Utilizing the *experiences* of Latinas/os, a LatCrit theory in education also theorizes and examines the place where racism *intersects* with other forms of subordination, such as sexism and classism.
- LatCrit scholars in education acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to operate and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower.
- LatCrit theory in education is conceived as a *social justice* project that

attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community.

- LatCrit theory in education is *interdisciplinary* and draws on many other schools of progressive scholarship. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 479).

Students Interviewed

The students interviewed for this research attend a very special state university in California, whose total student body is approximately 25% Latina/Latino students. Almost one-half of the residents of the three surrounding counties have a Mexican or Mexican-American background and have a job related to agriculture in the areas that surround the campus. The university's commitment to their nearby communities, which makes it unique and distinctive, is expressed in its vision statement: "The campus will be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations" (University Vision Statement).

The interviews selected to be analyze in this research were chosen primarily because both represented the experiences

of students who are deemed as *vision students*. However, despite the fact that both students share a common ethnic background and socio-economic status their academic experiences were different.

The first student explained how the formal academic mentoring she received from an academic counselor in a Migrant program at the high school she attended made her consider the opportunity to attend college. She states:

*Yo conoci un señor que ahorita es consejero por parte del programa migrante en la high school que yo fui. Y el me motivo, el miro en mi, que yo tenia buenos grados y miro tambien que tenia la motivacion, que yo si puedo estar en la universidad. El me decia que como la clase de persona que yo soy, que puedo hacer bien las tareas, que me gusta trabajar con la gente, el decia, "tu tienes la capacidad de ir a la universidad". Entonces el me dio muchos catalagos de diferentes universidades, me empezo a mencionar de la ayuda financiera. Y de hay dije bueno, pues tengo cuatro años y no tengo nada más que hacer poque no tomar la oportunidad de investigar estas universidades.*³

³ I met a man who is a counselor in the Migrant program at the high school I attended. He motivated me, he saw that I had good grades and also that I had the motivation, that I could be in a university. He used to tell me that the type of person that I am, that does well on her homework and that likes to work with people, he used to say, "You have the capacity to go to college". So he gave me catalogs from different universities, and told me about financial aid. And

The second student interviewed explained how the constant migration she experienced during her high school years tracked her as a non-college bound student and how the informal mentoring she received from her mother made her consider the opportunity to pursue a college career. She states:

I've been moving from here [California] to Arizona my whole life. I was in four schools, for high schools in three years. And people thought, "well she is moving around, she is not gonna get much education, she is not gonna get whatever she needs to get out of high school." And it came to the point were that I was gonna graduate from high school, and even when we were there and parents were congratulating us and one of my friends' mother told me "I am still surprise. I am very surprise because I thought you were gonna drop out."

College wasn't my first choice. My first choice was the marines or the army, but then again, my mother came in, and she made me think about it. I hardly been away from my mom, and I don't think I'll be able to leave her because I care for her too much. I told her, "I'm going to apply to one university, if they accept me well I'm gonna, you know I'm gonna stay. And I'm gonna go to college instead of going to the marines or to the army", so I just applied to one university and they accepted me. So I stayed.

from there, I said, well I have four years and I don't have anything else to do, why don't take the opportunity to investigate these universities.

The story of this student shows the complexity of Latina experience in an academic setting. Issues such as migration, lack of academic guidance, and emotional support frequently get overlooked by academia and are perceived as negative cultural aspects. Thus, the socio-economic status that forces families to migrate following seasonal work, the constant cultural shock students experience, the lack of proper academic guidance, and the difficulties that imply the constant academic and social adaptation affects the academic performance of Latino/a students but is not recognized properly.

Language is another important aspect that is not perceived positively. During the interviews, the students touched on this topic. Even though both students' interviews were bilingual, one was conducted in Spanish, and the other one was conducted in English. This was a response to the students' request. The acquisition of English and Spanish allowed my interviewees to negotiate in a positive way their roles both in the academic and family sphere. These students talked about their interests in selecting a university because of its

proximity to home, its small population, and their contact with a person who was currently attending it. Both students shared similar academic and personal goals, which included the intention of pursuing service careers in education, a commitment to return to their community, support their families, and serve as role models for other Chicana/Latina students.

During the analysis of my interviews, I questioned the way in which students were trying to succeed in their college career without losing contact with their families. According to Villenas and Moreno (2001), “funds of knowledge *consejos* (advise), *cuentos* (stories) and *la experiencia* (experience) function as the pedagogical vehicles for the explicit, implicit, and strategically ambiguous teaching of gendered lessons in the lives of Latina mothers” (673).

Then, I adopted the concept of *funds of knowledge* to analyze the interviews. Both interviews resembled Villenas and Moreno (2001) statements about the significant contribution of family and community values where Latino parents assumed the role of educators [mentors]. Latina families and communities have great influence in their children’s

educación (education). This suggests that academic mentors must value and recognize the importance of the family’s influence in the accomplishment of the mentee’s personal and academic objectives. Also, mentors must recognize mentees’ individuality and resist imposing their own values and objectives on the students.

Significance of Research

Olga M. Welch (1997) explains that universities have viewed mentoring as critical to professional development and mobility. She also explains that within higher education such mentoring most often occurs in the informal but special sponsorship that a graduate student receives from a senior professor. However, the findings of my preliminary research suggest that even though academic researches on the college experiences of Latina/o students recognized the lack of mentors as one of the primary factors for the unsuccessful retention of low income first generation college students, formal mentoring rarely existed at the undergraduate academic level (Figueroa, 2002). Reichert and Absher’s (1997) study on the causes that affect minority students

in higher education concludes that mentoring programs serve as one of the best strategies to improve the retention of minority students (Stromei, 2000).

The statistics Solorzano and Yosso (2001) present indicate that in 1999 Latinas/os were for the first time the plurality of the K-12 public student population in California, at 41% (California Department of Education, 1999). And Chicanas/os make up the majority (about 80%) of the overall Latina/o population (478). Due to this data, I was interested in studying the mentor relationship of two Latina students.

Previous research

Findings of my preliminary research (Figueroa, 2002) reveal that the lack of understanding of Latina first generation, low-income students' academic and cultural background leads to failure of the mentoring and retention program for this particular group of students. Daskal Alber (1996) explains that intercultural misunderstanding occur for at least two reasons: (a) People expect the same behavior in the target culture that they find in their own culture and (b) the same behavior can be interpreted

differently in two cultures (Albert, 1983a; Albert & Triandis, 1979; in Daskal Albert, 1996). Thus, in order to develop successful mentor relationships with Latina/o first generation, low-income students, it is important for the mentor to possess great listening and empathic abilities, as well as be able to critique the student in a constructive way. But most importantly, it requires the mentor's ability to understand the academic and cultural background of her/his mentees.

As I stated in previous research (Figueroa, 2002), the *capacidad empática del mentor* (mentor's empathic ability) appears as one of the most important abilities a mentor possesses in order to develop successful relationships with her/his protégés. This aptitude provides the mentor with the ability to understand her/his protégé's perspectives and points of view. Therefore, it is easier for the mentor to identify ways to contribute to the protégés' positive academic and personal development. Future research is required to identify the factors that contribute to the development of this skill.

Empatía differs from the meaning of the word "empathy" in English. The

original term in Spanish refers the ability to correlate with the student's cultural, academic, and social life experiences. Coincidentally, the type of mentoring the students interviewed received fell into the two categories describe by Kram (1980). However, the psychosocial mentoring the interviewed students received was stronger than the career mentoring. Institutions started to develop formal mentoring programs that address the concern of first generation college students, particularly minorities to ensure a quality academic experience for them.

Unfortunately, the approach scholars present in relation to low-income students continues to be full of stereotypes and misunderstandings. For instance, Torrance, Goff and Satterfield (1998) describe low income students (Latino, African-American and Navajo students) negatively, as people who have complicated lives, are out of control, have a home language or language other than mainstream English, get bored with school, fail to see the relevance of education, and have no sense of identity (14-16). Whereas the study of Dolores Bernal (2001) reveals that having a second language other than mainstream

English has a positive impact on low income Latina students' academic and social lives. Knowing Spanish helped Latina students acquire English, and their bilingualism has been an asset to their education (629, 630). Also, Delgado Bernal (2001) explains the use of Spanish in both academic and social setting can be seen as forms of resistance because this behavior challenges the historical and current anti-immigrant and English-only sentiments in California and throughout the Southwest (631).

Torrance, Goff, and Satterfield work (1998) recognizes that when the economically disadvantaged [students] are given such an opportunity [as attending school], they are given all kinds of encouragement as long as they remain courteous, conforming, and accepting of mainstream values. However, Torrance, Goff and Satterfield (1998) fail to recognize the racist practices at schools. For instance, Torrance (1998), writes that if low-income students who happened to be from Hispanic, African American, and Navajo communities do not assimilate in the mainstream ideology, they are ridiculed, rejected, excluded, and

punished in an effort to reform them (89).

LatCrit and Critical Race Theory suggest that the assumption that such students need to be reformed perpetuates educational stereotypes that see economically disadvantaged students as *given* opportunities to study rather than having earned them by their academic abilities. Saying that such students are difficult to reform is another way of saying that their identities are wrong. Torrance's work (1998) also ignores racist practices implemented in schools such as the tracking system described in one of the interviews analyzed in this research.

Counter-storytelling

A play script: a *charla* with my mentor

In 1994, I started my career as a scriptwriter at Xochimilco Theater. Neztahualcoyotl, the theater director assigned me to write a script for the fall production of that same year. I remembered talking with some of my theater colleagues about the idea to collaborate together in the production of a cultural play. The objective was to capture the oral histories of *nuestros*

abuelos y comunidades (our grandparents/ancestors and communities).

As a writer, my intent is to capture cultural customs and traditions of communities that often get misinterpreted by dominant media. The cultural and historical value of storytelling has helped me to incorporate oral histories into my scripts. Storytelling has a rich and continuing tradition in African-American (Berkeley Art Center, 1982; Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Lawrence, 1992), Chicana/o (Paredes, 1997; Delgado, 1989, 1995a, 1996; Olivas, 1990), and Native American (Deloria, 1969; Williams, 1997b) communities. Delgado (1989) stated that oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to survival as well as the liberation of their communities.

I started writing the first draft of my script by describing the importance of education, *educación*, in the Latino/a community. Most of the elders have no formal education. In my script I described the college experiences of two young Latina students: Diana Tascaly and Galilea Neta. Both students had volunteered their time at the theater for

the past two years and had many cultural experiences to share. Both of them frequently talked about the *cuentos* (stories) and *consejos* (advises) their *abuelos* (grandparents) and parents used to guide them through their academic career. Diana and Galilea were the first of their respective families to pursue a college education; their parents work in the agricultural fields of Salinas, California.

Galilea and Diana became good friends of mine after working in the theater; they helped in the organization of several plays for children in local communities. The three of us share a culture and socioeconomic background, but our life experiences are different.

The afternoon of August 23, I decided to stay in the theater after everybody else left. The empty theater was my favorite place to sit down and write new stories. I was on stage reciting a scene of *La Malinche* play when Diana walked in the room. “*Buenas tardes Ramona,*” Diana greeted me.

“*Hi hija, como estas?*” (Hi dear, how are you?), I replied.

“*Fine. I’m doing fine, y Usted?*” Diana said in a respectful tone of voice.

“Diana, we had known each other for two years and you still call me *Usted*. You make me feel old,” I replied with a smile on my face. I was audibly reflecting on some of the literature reviews I had been doing for my script. I learned that *respeto* (respect) and *dignidad* (worthiness, dignity) are important customs of Latin Americans and Latinos (Daskal Albert, 1996). Diaz-Guerrero and Szalay (1991) describe the socialization of Mexican children as based on traditional values of respect and obedience (in Daskal Albert, 1996, p. 333). Diana's respectful attitude towards me supported what I had read in my readings.

“I know, I know, *pero es costumbre*. It’s the way I was raised, you know, its just that when I talk to you it is like if I would talk to my mom, or one my professors,” Diana explained to me feeling a little embarrassed.

“So, are you telling me that I am as old as your mom or one of your professors?” I asked.

“*No, no. Si le llamo de Usted es porque es una forma de respeto* (No, no. If I refer to you as *Usted* it is because it is a form of respect). I know you understand,” she said, and then

continued, “But, from now on I am going to talk to you in English because then I can just refer to ‘you’...”

“I understand,” I said.

“I haven’t seen you lately Ramona. You look tired. Are you OK?” Diana changed the subject, concerned.

“I’m fine just a little stressed out, *mija*. I am writing a play about the oral histories of members of our community, to honor our *abuelitas y abuelitos*’ knowledge. I need to conduct interviews with people from the community, but is very difficult because most of the time they’re working. *Y tu sabes que el trabajo del ‘fil’ es bien matado*. (And you know, the work in agricultural fields is very hard). These people work from five in the morning to six or seven at night or have two jobs so when they’re home all that they want to do is to relax or spend a little time with their families.”

“Yes, that’s very true Ramona. My mom is like that. She works from five in the morning to seven at night. Many times when she gets home, takes a shower, eats dinner, takes some food out to prepare for lunch that next day, prepares clothes for the next day of work and goes to sleep because its late and she has to get up very early in the morning.

The same routine repeats over and over. When I was home, I used to help her as much as I could but now that I left for college, I can’t help her any more. There are times when I just want to quit school to go back and help her, but she tells me, *‘No hija. Quedate en la escuela, no quiero que vivas esto, el trabajo en el ‘fil’ te mata*. (No daughter, stay at school. I don’t want you to go through this; the job in the field kills you.) If I am at college it is because of my mother’s advice and guidance.”

Diana’s comment surprised me, and I asked her to tell me more about her mother.

“Well, now that I am going to college I see how important my mother is. I do not mean that I did not know this before but now that I am at college, it is different because here at school I have friends, and I have a mentor. My mentor and my friend help me through out my college experience, whenever I feel down or sad they take the time no matter what happens, but my mom is my inspiration. She didn’t go to college. She barely finished grade school, but that doesn’t matter because she has showed me not to give up. No to give up in whatever I am doing, to keep on going

because there are always ways to do whatever I want to do,” Diana explained proudly.

Diana became quiet once again. I wanted to tell her that I understood, but instead respected her silence and allowed her to reflect on her story. Finally, Diana continued, “When I was in high school very few people had faith in me, there were a lot of people, professor, family members, and other people from my community who thought I was not college material. They believed I was not smart enough to attend college. And for that reason college wasn’t my first choice. My first choice was the marines or the army but my mother came in and made me think about it. She told me, ‘I want you to do whatever you feel like doing, but I’m afraid. I’m afraid that you are going to leave me, but I’ll work with that problem. I want you to do whatever you want to do because I don’t want to keep you from nothing you may regret after.’ And from that moment I just started thinking, and I told her, well I’m going to apply to one university, if they accept me well I’m going to stay and go to college instead of going to the marines or to the army. So I just applied to one

university and they accepted me. So I stayed.”

“I wanted to tell Diana that I appreciated her story. I wanted to let her know I understood how important her mother’s support was, and most of all I wanted to validate her story. Guadalupe Valdés’ (1996) work recognizes the value of Latina mothers by stating, Latina mothers believed their role as ‘educators’ required their constant engagement in the practice of *dando consejos* (*giving advices*) to guide their children’ (p. 125). But I opted to hug her.

A few moments passed, and I told Diana, “You are a fortunate woman for having such a wonderful mother. Her advice gave you the option to think about college and the possibility to realize you had the capacity, the intelligence to pursue a college career instead of going to the army. Latino families have such a strong influence on their children’s education. I know society often focuses on the negative aspects of Latinos. For example, schools complain that Latino parents do not care about their children’s education because they don’t participate in school activities. School members don’t see that

these parents work long hours, many times they don't speak English, or simply have a lot of respect for the teachers. Because of that respect, if they disagree with any of the school's practices, they don't feel they have the authority or right to express their ideas to professors (Baca Zinn, 1994. p 226-233)."

Diana looked at me and said, "Ramona, gracias for taking the time to recognize the advice and the knowledge mothers like mine provide their children. I feel this work is very special because it will be the result of a collaborate effort of all the people who work in the theater, but most important because it will give us the opportunity to return something to our community."

"That's right Diana, this story will serve to honor our elders' wisdom and to recognize students like you who have reached academic success and are role models for their communities."

Suddenly, we heard somebody walking in the theater. We turned around and saw Galilea Neta waking towards us. "Hello ladies, I am sorry to appear in this way but I was working here and couldn't help overhear your conversation. I want to

share my story with you too," Galilea said.

"Come on, join us Diana," I greet her into our conversation.

Galilea started telling us her testimony in this way, "At school I always was the trouble maker one. I always got good grades, and encouraged my friends to stay in school. When we are at school we get tracked to a certain place, you know, you're college bound, you're not college bound. I was one of the persons tracked to not go to college just because of the way I dressed and the people I would hang around with. And we as students know we're tracked to a certain place. Many of us give our hopes up. And there are a lot of young people in our communities who have the capacity to go to college, who want to go to college. But then the teachers give up on them or only help a certain group, and students see the difference, students see the difference when a counselor helps one student and doesn't help the other. They see the difference, and they think, 'Well, they don't even care, you know. Why am I even going to try?'"

Finally, Galilea concluded saying, "Ramona, let me be part of this project. I understand families and community

members play a very important role in our youth's education by giving them *buenos consejos* (good advice) we can encourage to remain in school."

I thanked both students, for their interest. It is because of students like them, who are aware of "school tracking systems" which describe racist practices, that Chicana/Latina students enter college with higher levels of altruism, stronger interest in service careers, and stronger interests in helping their communities. It is as Delgado Bernal (2001) explains in her research *Learning and living pedagogies of the home: the mestiza consciousness of Chicana students*. It is a heavy emotional burden that they carry on our shoulders. Because they are the first to go to college, they are a role model for our family and community. They are an example for younger siblings. They are mentors and they have a vision of the present and the future of serving the new incoming generations of Latina/Chicana students by recognizing their cultural values as assets to their education.

Reflection

Delgado Bernal (2001) explains that in Suarez-Orozco's (1989) ethnographic

research on Latina/o cultural and linguistic resources, he too found that "dedication, loyalty, and commitment to family... served as a stimulus for school success rather than a hindrance ..." (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 428) (p. 633). Therefore, the type of a multicultural mentoring model proposed by Torrance (1998) misinterprets and suggests poor effectiveness to develop successful mentoring programs for low-income first generation college students. For instance, Torrance, Goff, & Satterfield (1998) identify several labels to define mentors across cultures and periods of time. By doing so, labels such as "sponsor", "master", "tutor", "guru", "sensei", "patron", and "coach" have been used (p. 4). By analyzing the terms of master and patron, it is clear that the historical meaning of oppression these two words represent for African Americans, Mexicans and Indigenous people is dismissed. The use of these names shows the lack of cultural awareness of systems of oppression. For example, a master was a slave owner, and a patron oppressed and stole the land of Mexicans. By following the definition of mentor presented earlier in this paper,

there is no relation with it and the labels presented by Torrance.

The lack of cultural awareness possibly leads to the failure of such relationships. First-generation college students, particularly minorities (which most of the time happen to be low-income students), drop out before graduation because of inexperience or frustration with academic settings. Many encounter rejection and cultural isolation. Others experience confusion about academic goals and how to attain them. Still others are discouraged by bureaucratic requirements or academic environments that are not “learner-friendly” (Terrel & Hassell, 1994, p. 35). Although all students contend with academic stresses and adjustment difficulties, transition to college life is getting more difficult for racial/ethnic minorities than for white students (Rodriguez, 1994; Tint, 1987).

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