



When College Advising Must Cross Cultural Gaps. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.44 (July 7, 2006)(1752 words) From *General Reference Center Gold*.

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In the waiting room, before her Dartmouth interview, my student Tiffany noticed a key difference between herself and the other applicants. Parents accompanied the rest of the candidates, and some of them brokered business deals while they sat with their children. "They had their pagers and BlackBerrys," she later told me, "and this one father was talking on his Bluetooth, saying, 'Yeah, let's get that shipped over here and there.'"

Tiffany, a senior in my English class at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, in Chicago, also has parents with hectic jobs, but not the sort of work you can do over a cellphone. Her Mexican-immigrant father is a machine operator at a factory and her mother a cook at an elementary school. They support their daughter's college quest, but can't relate to her choices. "Dartmouth is the same to them as DePaul," Tiffany told me.

Her parents are articulate and avid readers, but the culture gap is undeniable. It's a familiar disconnect between immigrant parents who often have not had the opportunity to finish high school (or even grade school) at home and their American-born children. Blue collar meets Bluetooth. The local educational system on Chicago's Southwest Side does not offer most students a clear path to success, and approximately 60 percent of teenagers in the area drop out of high school.

Our private school has a better success rate -- at least 80 percent of our some 100 graduates a year move on to college, whether to two-year or four-year institutions. Our students are all Hispanic, the majority of them children of immigrants.

"My mom's not gonna call an admissions officer over at Smith, or know what's a good score on the ACT," Tiffany said. For those things, she has turned to school and colleagues at her corporate internship downtown. Our college counselor, Araceli Gomez, advises parents on everything from using coupon booklets for student loans to the difference between an Ivy League and state college. She points out the convenience of having an on-campus library that's open at 1 a.m. Still, some parents remain uneasy about having a child move away. Karina, who was recently accepted to Georgetown, told me that her father is reluctant to visit the D.C. campus. "He says he's just from a small town in Mexico," she said.

As a teacher and academic adviser, I often urge parents to consider sending their children away to college. With my uneven Spanish, I am probably not the most convincing source as I argue that living in a dormitory could help them mature further and focus on their studies. Many of my listeners politely resist, mentioning that their homes are well set up and they can arrange for their child to commute. Some have explained that in their culture, young people usually live with their families until marriage. I'm not immune to the argument --

my own parents, children of Irish and Italian immigrants, worked while attending colleges close to their homes.

But I have also seen the urgency of getting away, at least temporarily, from troubled neighborhoods. Three years ago, one of my most promising students was murdered. Several months before he was shot, Sergio had achieved a stellar score on the PSAT. In our final conversation, he and I discussed whether he should apply to a summer academic program at Notre Dame. Long after his death, college recruitment letters continued to pour in to his parents' home.

Every year before the seniors begin Hamlet, I give them related modern scenarios to act out. One of the most popular has a father talking to his child about to go off to college, a la Polonius to Laertes as the latter departs for France. Sometimes the students ham it up, with the father urging the child to study hard, lay off the alcohol, and be careful about dating and sex ("keep it in the cage," I've heard). Usually, though, the scene becomes serious, and suddenly the whole class is eerily attentive. "You're about to go off to college, Mijo, and I don't know what that looks like," my student Americo, playing the father, once summarized a lot of the fears I hear.

Now Americo has finished his freshman year at St. John's in New York. He came to talk to my current seniors in the spring. He spoke a bit about course work, but focused more on the merits of going out of state. He was clearly excited as he described making a PowerPoint presentation for one of his introductory classes, "Discover New York," which included such diverse images as the New York Mosque, Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night" at the Museum of Modern Art, and a man dressed as Oscar the Grouch getting into a cab the day after the Greenwich Village Halloween parade. After telling us about his part-time office job in Manhattan, he produced a map of New York's boroughs and subways. It went around the class, and afterward two students decided to apply to St. John's.

Financial aid is hefty for most of my students -- the median family income at our school is around \$31,000 for a family of four. Many elite colleges have been generous, but the students and their families still worry about money. One day my student Jimmy told me he was removing his application from consideration at an Ivy League university. Startled, I asked why. He said the state university that had accepted him needed a deposit of \$100. I pointed out that many students put down more than one deposit, and encouraged him to seek a fee waiver. But Jimmy remained hesitant: "I can't lose that money," he said. Fortunately, several weeks later he won a Gates Millennium Scholarship, which covers tuition to the institution of his choice.

Still, no matter how much advice we offer students, I'm often reminded of the importance of respecting their decisions. Miguel, passionate about politics and immigration law, last spring became the first student at our school to be accepted at Harvard, but he decided to go to Brown. Both were dazzling options, but some of us questioned turning down Harvard. Miguel, though, remained firm. He had already gone to a summer program at Brown and was attracted to its open curriculum. Now, a year later, he is flourishing and already thinking about law school.

Not all of our students who leave home, though, finish college away. Every year a few transfer back to institutions here in Chicago. The students cite a number of reasons: homesickness for family and the city, finances, and too

few fellow students of color. To many of those concerns, I have no good answer. Nationally, a large portion of Hispanic students attend college, but comparatively few attain four-year degrees. Studies from groups like the Pew Hispanic Center indicate that Hispanics lag far behind Caucasians in completing bachelor's degrees.

Some of my former students think that may have to do with subtle racism that they have discerned at college -- at one East Coast university, a student said, her classmates first assumed she was from California or Texas because she was Hispanic. Another student reported that at a university in downstate Illinois, a white classmate was shocked when the Hispanic student occasionally made spelling errors in Spanish. It took the professor, he said, to point out that someone who had grown up speaking Spanish was not always an expert in reading and writing it.

Several years ago, a talented student of mine turned down a scholarship to a state university to stay home and care for a family member. I admired her selflessness, but also urged her to enroll at a strong local college. The young woman decided, instead, to attend a community college with a mediocre reputation. "School's school," she said. In many ways, I agree that determined students can do well almost anywhere, but I also know that quality can vary.

My official job ends when my students graduate from high school, but many of them face a tougher job staying in college and thriving. They love to report back to me on college classes and whether the students are prepared for them. Last year a former student sent me an e-mail message from her private college in Minnesota. She began by thanking me for my senior-year course in British literature, but then moved quickly on to areas I needed to improve:

"So what I am trying to say is that having read Frankenstein helps me understand the baseline of the story, but in college I am asked critical-thinking questions. Such as why did Victor run away from the creature? My answer was that he had been all alone for all these years, and I feel that he sort of feels inferior to another man around. Or is it that he is afraid of what the creature is capable of doing to him?"

As a former university lecturer, I had deluded myself into thinking that I did occasionally prompt critical thinking. But I liked the confidence my former student showed in her note, and the, well, critical thinking.

Of course, our school always tries to focus on college, and some of the students wonder why. It's true our preaching about higher education can become an almost banal mantra. To justify it, I used to talk about learning opportunities and earning potential, the possibility of studying abroad. These days, though, I have a more basic answer: College is not a cure-all, a magic pill, and it might not make you smarter or even well rounded. But having a degree will probably mean that you won't be stuck forever in a job you hate. When I ask the students how many of them know people who are trapped in jobs -- due to lack of education, language, or immigration issues -- nearly everyone's hand goes up.

My students' parents may know little about college academics, but they are savvy in different ways. They understand that the education they desire for their children can change them, even as it creates new opportunities. What the parents all value is hard work. Certain ironies are not lost on them. The immigrant mother of a former student recently told me with amazement how her son had been raising funds for his college fraternity. "Selling tamales,"

said his mother in Spanish, shaking her head and smiling slyly. "Mi hijo, en la universidad." My son, at college.

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Source Citation: "When College Advising Must Cross Cultural Gaps." The Chronicle of Higher Education 52.44 (July 7, 2006): NA. General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Woodland Public Library. 10 Nov. 2007
<<http://find.galegroup.com/ips/start.do?prodId=IPS>>.

Gale Document Number:A147838811

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