Higher education today is “limited to a lucky few” that may have access to or the opportunity to attend a four year institution (Thacker 2005:91). Many students particularly those who are first generation may lack knowledge regarding college life, classes, and degree plans. This may impact their four year graduation plan delaying graduation. Therefore, advising may play an important role in a student’s college experience (Light 2001:81). Advice and support that derives from not only advisors and professors, but from peers as well may help guide first generation students in their endeavor to graduate college in four years.

The following is based on the findings from the experiences of eight Latino college students attending a four-year Hispanic serving institution and is part of a large research project conducted by a research team of a graduate qualitative research methods class. The study was guided by two research questions focusing on four year college graduation rates. Question 1: What factors affect graduation rates at a four-year Hispanic serving institution of higher education? Question 2: Are students graduating in four years? If so how? If not, why not? This papers consists of a literature review, a theoretical framework using social capital theory, a methods section, a findings section, and a discussion and a conclusion section which includes limitations and recommendations for future research on four-year college graduation rates.

Literature Review

According to the Pew Hispanic Center report although many Latino students are enrolling in postsecondary education “most are pursuing paths associated with lower chances of attaining a bachelor’s degree” (Fry 2002:1). Many of these Latino students are enrolling into community colleges, attending part-time, and delaying or prolonging their college education (Fry 2002: 1). Many of these Latino students enrolling into college may be first generation students and may
struggle to obtain a bachelor’s degree within a four year time frame (Ishitani 2006: 862). This may be due to other responsibilities such as working or even lacking the knowledge of how to accomplish graduation within four year.

According to Kuh (2009) student engagement is important for students’ college experience and is supported by research to have a “positive association with a range of desired outcomes of college” (p. 698). Campbell and Nutt (2008) also note that while there may be many ways of supporting student engagement in learning one possible strategy that could help students is that of “academic advising” (p. 4). When done effectively academic advising may be beneficial to students in helping them engage in learning activities (Campbell and Nutt 2008: 4). Academic advising may be particularly important for first generation students that may lack the social support or social networks that may provide information about college.

Light (2001) also agrees that academic advising plays a critical role in a college student’s experience. Advisors may ask questions and provide suggestions that may be designed particularly for them and their situation (Light 2001: 84-85). However, according to Kuh (2009), there are “between forty and fifty percent of first year students [who] never use career planning, financial advising, or academic tutoring services” (p.692). Likewise, Hunter and White (2004) also note that thousands of students each year may avoid meeting with an advisor and not only are they not graduating on time, but they miss the opportunity of creating “a meaningful learning experience for themselves” (p.21).

According to Tinto (2005), three types of support that may promote student success in college is academic, social, and financial support (p.3). First generation students “tend to be at a disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education” (Pascarella et
al. 2004: 250). Therefore, it may be important for first generation students to engage and seek out support from academic advisors, professors, or peers. According to Kuh et al. (2005) colleges that implement the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) program, encourage their students to interact with other peers in “educationally purposeful ways” (p.248). This may help first generations students learn from their peers and their experiences at the college or university they attend.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical perspective that may be used to explain why social support from academic advisors, professors, and peers may help students be successful in graduating college in four years may be social capital theory. This theory “refers to the relationships one has and the extent to which those relationships can mobilize resources” (Ehler and Whibrowski 2007: 582). The social connections and social networks that individuals form with others may help enhance other forms of capital and provide resources that one may lack (Dillon 2010: 249).

Pascarella et al., (2004) used a culture and social capital theoretical perspective in their study of first generation students’ experiences and outcomes in which they noted social engagement contributed to their cultural and social capital. Among first generation students engaging in extracurricular activities had a positive impact on critical thinking, degree plans…and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks (Pascarella et al., 2004:252). Likewise, Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007) used a cultural and social capital approach that helped them understand “they types of social support helpful for first-and-second generation college students” (p. 582). They found that students who participated in the Educational Opportunity Fund program received support from counselors, program administrators and faculty supporting and
enhancing students’ cultural and social capital by influencing their academic and social choices (Ehlers and Wibrowski 2007:582-583). First and second generation students also found support from their peers who were participating and going through the same “academic rigors” (Ehler and Wibrowski 2007: 583). Although, first generation students may lack social capital they may be able to form relationships and connections with others that may provide resources in the form of advice and support necessary for their success.

Methods

This study included currently enrolled undergraduate students 18 years and older and alumni from a four year Hispanic serving institution of higher education. The research team conducted a total of 105 interviews which consisted of individual interviews and focus groups. Each researcher conducted five interviews and one focus group of either three or more participants. I conducted five individual interviews and a focus group with three participants. My sample group was made up of eight Mexican American students, seven males and one female, between the ages of 19 and 30. The students had different major, many were employed full-time or part-time, seven were currently enrolled full-time undergraduate students, and one was an alumni.

The research team collaborated with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and was submitted for approval. Once approved the research team began seeking out participants and interviewing. Both convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit student participants. Contact was made by phone or email and an explanation of the research was provided using an approved script. Once students agreed to participate a meeting was scheduled at a location of their choice and convenience. A consent form was given to each participant and
they were given enough time to read over the form and ask any questions. Participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and could withdraw from the study at any time.

Interviews were conducted at different locations and were recorded on my cell phone. Participants’ names were not written or recorded on any material in order to keep confidentiality. An interview guide, previously tested with the research team, was utilized during the interview. The interview guide consisted of questions regarding the length of time it took or was going to take students to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree and the factors that may affect graduation. Before each interview participants were asked to fill out a demographic form which was returned to the researcher. Each interview lasted anywhere between twenty minutes to an hour. Three interviews and the focus group were transcribed and coded by hand or with NVivo, a computer software used to code and analyze data. The codes were categorized by themes such as peer support, family support, advisors, work impact, etc. Once all the interviews were coded data was analyzed and organized by emerging themes.

The findings from this study are not meant to be generalized across all colleges or universities. The findings are based on the experiences of eight students attending this particular four year university. Although, the sample size of this study is small it may still be considered significant and important particularly for this institution. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) note that “the logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding, usually working with small samples (p. 45). The reason for the small sample size is the time constraint the research team had to conduct this research project. Most student research has to be done over the course of one semester, therefore, “given the time limit on student research projects… students who conduct in-depth interviews often collect data on a very small sample of respondent”
(Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011: 125). Therefore, the time constraints of finishing the research project over the course of one semester limited the sample size to a small group of students.

Findings

Three particular themes arose while coding and analyzing the data, these were the impact of advisors, peer support and teachers. Some students recalled having their academic advisor help them at some point and some suggested the need for improvement in guiding and supporting them. They also mentioned that the support they received from their peers through a social network of friends, study groups, or student organizations have help them or may help other students be successful. Students also mentioned that professors teaching methods and support could help them in class and in completing certain courses. Though each student’s college experience is different many of the participants had similar responses and views concerning academic advisors, professors, and peer support on campus.

Academic Advisors

Students believed that academic advisors were there to help students and found them to be resourceful if utilized. However, although support systems such as academic advising may be in place, students need to seek out and take advantage of such resource. This may be difficult for some students because they may not have the time to meet with an advisor due to employment, they may not know their advisor, or may not know how to ask for help.

Students mentioned both good and bad experiences with their advisor. Some of the participants had good experiences with their advisors and felt that their advisor had helped them. One student recalls his experience with his advisor once he had declared a major:
Once I told an advisor I wanted to be a marketing major, then that eight semester degree plan showed up…So then once I did that they were very helpful and kind of laid it out and they will help you out.

However, he does recall that prior to this experience he had difficulty with his degree plan because he was undecided and the advisor could not lay out a four year degree plan for him.

He stated,

So when I talked to the counselor he kept recommending, ‘you should take 12 hours if you’re not really sure.’ Which is a safe recommendation for a lot of students because some students can’t take 15 hours, but because I took 12 hours that semester…traditionally if you want to do the four years you have to do 15, 15, 15, and it adds up. So right off the bat because I took 12 hours I was behind one semester already…just because of that one decision, just because I didn’t really know and they suggested 12 hours it set me back right of the bat, but I was able to overcome it by taking summer school.

Other students recall similar experiences with their advisors. During the focus group interview the students talked about the lack of encouragement from advisors to graduate in four years. The interview went as followed,

P2: …Because if you really think about it there’s no one here encouraging you to graduate in four years. Even advisors there not like, ‘you can do it come on,’ but it would be nice.

P3: I just talked to mine today and she gave me that degree plan thing and she said here are the suggested ones to do in four years, but I don’t recall her saying like, ‘go for it’ or anything like that.

P1: I was going to say that too, I don’t remember anyone ever asking do you intend on graduating in four years.

P3: or even do you want to graduate in four years

From these students’ experiences, although advisors may be able to help them set up a degree plan they are not encouraging students to graduate in four years. Another student recalls the following experience.
They do explain that stuff, I think it’s shown two different times. They say, ‘if you mess up you have all of this, if not make sure you are taking a total of 15 hours… I don’t think they ever add it up and say if you take 15 hours and drop 6 that leaves you a semester and a half behind. You know, they never put the equal sign at the end of the equation. So I think it needs to be explained.

As this student recalls, advisors need to explain credit hours to students in a better manner so that students understand that if they want to graduate in four years they have to take eight semesters and fifteen hours per semester in order to graduate on time.

Teacher Support

Faculty may also play an important role in a student’s college experience. Depending on the professor, the amount of work they require, the way they teach, the way they organize their class and the support they provide to their students may have an impact on their graduation. One participant mentioned that she had dropped several classes, but one class in particular made a difference. This student stated, “she [referring to her professor] was really, really passionate about her class and I got an A. I think that if the teacher was more passionate about the class I would give it more effort.”

Another student mentions that the professor you take for a particular class may make the difference between passing and having to retake the course. According to Kuh (2003) as “students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing or problem solving, the adept they become” (p.25). This may be an important task for professors that may have a “profound impact” on an undergraduate’s college experience (Light 2001:104).

Peer Support
Students also felt that peer support was important in graduating in four years. Support from students who have experienced and been through the same academic rigors as new students may face may be valuable. Student participants noted that the student led study groups on campus were a form of support because they provide aid to students who may need help in a particular subject and provide encouragement.

Belonging to a group or an organization may also be beneficial for students. The focus group interview was composed of three members of an organization on campus whose main focus was helping and supporting its members. One student stated,

So just the network of people and just knowing each other and know enough when their classes are and knowing how well they are doing…So just knowing someone enough and having those conversations I think helps a lot of people, you know one [may] pass classes that they are struggling with, but at the end of the day you know they are not classes they are dropping or failing. That can add up to graduating in four years.

Another student stated, “It’s really great to see us helping each other with the goal in mind of graduating, not necessarily in a certain time, but [with] that big goal of graduating.”

The support that students receive from other students whether it is in a study group with other classmates or support from members of an organization or a group on campus may be beneficial to students. This may add to their social capital by helping them obtain information and support from peers that may have similar experiences. One student expressed this by saying,

I think you kind of need a network of someone [who has] either been through it, going through it already, whether that’s an advisor or…a group of kids that you are friends with or that have been through that thing and they know that you shouldn’t take business law and finance in the same semester because that’s just crazy.
Having the support from peers in the form of advice about courses and professor or the encouragement and support from forming friendships through study groups or organizations may help students succeed in graduating in four years.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the experiences of these eight college students one can note that having social support within a college may be valuable in aiding students graduate in four years. Support from academic advisors, professors, and peers may direct students towards a successful path. Students’ social capital increases as they form relationships with academic advisors, professors, and peers. Forming such relations may “provide access to resources and forms of support that facilitate the accomplishment of goals” (Stanton-Salizar 2004: 18). This may be important for first generation students because they may lack social capital and may be at a disadvantage coming in as the first in their family to attend college.

Therefore, it is important for academic advisors to identify those students that are isolated and do not participate in extracurricular activities and those who are unwilling to seek out help (Light 2001:36). Advisors may also develop “time logs” or “advising notebooks” that may help guide both advisors and students in a four year graduation plan (Light 2001; Kuh et al. 2005). With these tools students and advisors may be able to track a four year degree plan. It is important to note that not all degrees may be completed in four years it may all depend on the degree plan and the field of study. The support that first generation students may receive from others may be beneficial in providing them with knowledge about courses, requirements, and experiences.
Although this study may have been limited by the amount of time and the small sample size the results may give us insight into what students at this particular institution believed to be beneficial in graduating in four years. Many of these students were first generation students and their experiences may portray the needs that first generation students have once they enter college. With more time this research project could expand and allow more students to participate particularly more first generation students. Further research may help us understand the needs of first generation students attending four year Hispanic serving institutions in order to develop solutions to increase four year graduation rates and creating successful college experiences.
The Importance of Social Support in a Four Year College

References


