Latino Students and College Admissions Practices: The Multiple Lenses Approach

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Introduction

This paper examines four critical frames of academic leadership by Bolman and Gallos (2011). Specifically, the paper focuses on admissions counselors and the role they play in engaging and promoting college success with Latino students who might either be documented or undocumented. Admissions counselors are an integral part of the university team as they serve as the gateway to higher education for prospective students. They recruit students statewide and nationwide, facilitate recruitment events, and engage students at a personal level. Adding to their list of duties, they are not only representative of the college but they are also at the forefront of providing an educational pathway for Latino students.

According to Pew Research Center Hispanic Trends, Latinos between 18 and 24 years of age are the fastest growing population in college (Fry & Lopez, 2012), but they still lag behind other students in college completion (Barshay, 2018; Excelencia in Education, n.d.; Kolodner, 2017; Moore & Shulock, 2010). Furthermore, Latino undocumented students, constituting only a small percent among the general population of Latino students, experience a more serious crisis in both college access and educational achievement (Perez, 2010). By reframing College Admissions through structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames, admissions counselors can adopt new professional practices that can encourage Latino students and Latino undocumented students to achieve college attainment and their educational goals.

Structural Frame

The structural framework is vital for admissions counselors when assisting Latino students. The majority of Latino students are low income, academically underperforming, socially disadvantaged, and most likely, they prioritize family loyalty over college completion
(Marrero, 2016). Navigating the college system and acculturating to the college life might not be easily adaptable for these students. Not only is it important for admissions counselors to be well-versed in program-related conversations but also know how to articulate information related to college services (e.g., textbook services, food services, health services, etc.) and cultural programs and organizations (e.g. clubs, student councils, etc.) effectively. Also, admissions counselors must work with other departments, such as financial aid, university housing, and student affairs in order to foster a welcoming, well-connected college environment.

Admissions counselors must also know immigration policies. The Illinois Association for College Admission Counseling says that one of the best ways to help students who may not want to disclose their unauthorized status is to provide helpful resources (“College Advising Guide,” n.d.) that pertain to their immigration background. These resources help both unauthorized students and college professionals navigate through current federal and state policies, as well as gain clearer understanding of the immigration landscape. Applying the structural frame in admissions would define college-going expectations, increase immigration policy awareness, and highlight rules and policies that shape the college experience, all of which are necessary to help Latino students become part of the university community.

**Human Resources Frame**

According to Marrero (2016), Latinos have a strong family culture and the value that Latinos place on their families is tremendously significant. When they leave their home for college, however, their self-assurance might run into challenges when adapting to a new educational and social environment, adhering to the university culture, and separating from their families. Thus, looking at College Admissions through a human resources lens is a critical necessity as admissions counselors become more like family to these students.
Bolman and Gallos (2011) say that the human resources framework encourages stronger departmental teamwork and communication across campus, leadership trust, and empowerment. Additionally, the human resources view is like the extended family where everyone’s feelings matter. As the structural lens calls for admissions counselors to learn more about its Latino population, the human resource lens encourages staff to understand the Latino culture and the politics that surround their life as immigrants. In other words, admissions counselors must not only be culturally sensitive to the Latino student population but also be an advocate for them. They also need to exercise cultural awareness and acceptance to welcome these students. With this kind of family-oriented leadership, the action of admissions counselors would encourage other departments and administrators to treat these students like family. According to Garibay, Herrera, Johnston-Guerrero, and Garcia (2015), when there is more cultural awareness, contact, and support for immigrants, the more acceptance grows within the institution.

Cerna and Beal (2018) suggest that one of the ways for colleges and universities to assist their Latino students is to embrace shared responsibility. One of the tenets of the human resources frame is for honest and transparent leadership. According to Bolman and Gallos (2011), “leaders provide support, coaching, and care for their constituents” (p. 94). This is how admissions counselors should practice when promoting cultural and racial diversity on campus. When departments are on the same page and align their support with college admissions, shared responsibility becomes more conducive and instrumental to the learning achievement and motivation of Latino students (Cerna & Beal, 2018).

**Political Frame**

Immigration reform has become the center of national attention in the United States. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and whether or not these students should
become legalized have aroused strong opinions from all parts of society and institutions. Bolman and Gallos (2011) appropriately and accurately describe the political frame as a jungle (p. 71), where everyone has their point of view and deep-rooted beliefs. Promoting immigrant rights across campus and asking departments to go the extra mile to work with undocumented students could be challenging for admissions counselors as they attempt to make campus more inclusive through partnerships and relationships among different units.

In the political frame, admissions counselors are viewed as advocates, negotiators, and strategists. Their leadership role in this particular context is to bargain, build coalitions, set agendas, and manage conflict (Bolman & Gallos, 2011, p. 72). Undocumented students are not eligible for in-state tuition rates, though some states do grant it (Rogan, 2017). These same students are not eligible for federal financial aid either (FAFSA, 2015). When it comes to serving Latino students who are undocumented in this capacity, the task of the admissions counselor becomes complicated as the institutional and immigration policy works against them. How are admissions counselors supposed to help undocumented students in this case? These students rely on helpful resources and information that lead to financing their college education in other ways, but most importantly, they depend on the advocacy of the admissions counselors to be a voice for them in a much bigger context that results in legislative action.

**Symbolic Frame**

The last frame is the symbolic frame, which embodies true leadership when working with Latino students, especially those with undisclosed immigration status. Latino students, namely those who are undocumented, face systemic barriers from finance to education and other forms of exclusion (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010). With various forms of exclusion, admissions counselors have to develop new methods of outreach and recruitment (Gamez-Vargas & Oliva,
2013). Through symbolic leadership, admissions counselors can do their part by recognizing and acknowledging their existence in the social and college setting. Admissions counselors can encourage and support their learning efforts and make their college-going experience meaningful and purposeful by supporting their fight for immigrant rights, inspiring them to never give up regardless of barriers, and communicating with them about their concerns, achievements, and progress. In this framework, admissions counselors are spiritual leaders who guide them and encourage them throughout their journey in higher education.

**Conclusion**

While all four frames are invaluable to effect change in college admissions leadership, the two most important frames that have a greater impact are the political and symbolic frames. On one hand, granting in-state tuition access to undocumented students breaks down barriers. By allowing them to pay affordable rates, they could have a better chance to succeed. On the other hand, Latino students in general need personal encouragement and emotional support to reach their goals. Symbolic leadership is imperative because symbolic leaders believe in them and are willing to go the extra mile to ensure that they achieve their educational goals.

These four frames are not only applicable to college admissions but also to other departments of the university. Latino and undocumented students are going to college because they see education as a pathway to improve their lives. Therefore, it is the moral responsibility of university leadership and governance to undergo essential changes that are more conducive and inclusive to the needs of Latino students and Latino undocumented students. This moral imperative begins with reshaping college admissions practices.
References


