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Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Making College Aspirations Real for Students and Families

Patricia Gándara, Ph.D. • March 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College
Practice: Foster College Aspirations

Highlights

- Dr. Patricia Gándara points out the need to foster students' college-going aspirations early in their school career.
- Low-income and first-generation college goers need strong role models in the workplace. These students can benefit from mentoring relationships with professionals in the community whose jobs required them to attend college.
- Students also need to be surrounded by peers that have college-going aspirations.
- As schools seek to foster their students' college-going aspirations, it is important to make it a collaborative effort that includes students, parents, administrators, teachers, and community members.

About the Interviewee

Patricia Gándara is professor of education in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

and codirector of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA. She received her Ph.D. in educational psychology from UCLA. She has been a bilingual school psychologist, a social scientist with the RAND Corporation, director of education research in the California Legislature (State Assembly) and commissioner for postsecondary education for the state of California, and associate director of the UC Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Professor Gándara's research focuses on educational equity and access for low-income and ethnic-minority students, language policy, and the education of Mexican-origin youth.

Full Transcript

Hi, my name is Patricia Gándara, and I am a professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles. I am also the codirector of the Civil Rights Project.

It's very important for young people to develop college-going aspirations early, to have some sense early on in their school careers that college is a goal for them. For many minority students, low-income students, this isn't something that comes to them until they are well into high school and people begin discussing it. I think we have done a pretty good job of convincing students in high school that college is important and they should set that as a goal. And the evidence for that is that most of the surveys I have seen over the last few years show that 90% and above of students, no matter what kind of background they come from, anticipate going to college. But when students have not been prepared for this earlier on, it's oftentimes too late to make those aspirations real.

In elementary school, a lot of programs begin to simply introduce the idea of college, of what it's about. But certainly by middle school, kids have to know that this is where they are headed or at least that it's an opportunity or possibility for them. Many decisions are made in middle school that have huge repercussions in high school for whether kids will be able to be ready for college or not.

One of the important ways, though, that young people learn about college and learn about how to prepare for college and why they should even go to college is from their peers. And so when students are in very isolated and segregated schools, which many minority students are, they are not exposed to peers who know anything about this, and it really prevents that from happening. So the extent to which we can help ensure that the low-income students, the minority students, aren't all on a single track, that's a track to nowhere, or aren't all clustered together in schools in which there are few middle-class students or students who are aspiring to college—the extent to which we work on those kinds of problems is we are going to increase the real aspirations of young people.

One of the strategies that's used with young people to raise their aspirations for college going is to use mentors from the workplace. So students have the opportunity to actually go to places where middle-class people actually work, where people who need college degrees work, and get the opportunity to experience what that's like and what really is entailed in these kinds of jobs, which is often really foreign to young

people who are coming from low-income backgrounds. They have never known anybody who does these kinds of jobs, and they have never been able to make that connection to why one goes to college.

Examples of the kinds of things that people can do to really foster a sense of college going and raising aspirations include things like college campus visits, actually seeing what a college campus is like, and then making it more real beyond that by introducing them to students like themselves who are in college. That's even better than people who have been to college because if it's somebody who is a peer, somebody very close in your own age who you can talk to about what that's really like and who can explain to you from the same kind of age cohort what the experience is like, that can be really very important for students. I know it was for me. That's what made a difference for me going to college is I knew one person who had the aspirations of going to college and she talked to me about that, and that planted the idea in my mind.

If I were giving advice to a principal about how to go about doing this in his or her school, I think the first thing I would say is that it needs to be comprehensive, that it needs to not only work directly with the students in raising their aspirations, it needs to happen with the faculty and having the faculty understand that the aspirations need to be supported across the faculty for these students. And I would have a piece, of course, that deals with the parents, because the parents, oftentimes—all parents want what is best for their kids and all parents want opportunities for their children, but usually the problem here is parents don't know what those opportunities are or how to engage them. So I would say that you've got to do a really comprehensive effort and not focus in any single place.