

No Time to Waste

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When I was asked to be a part of a panel to meet with 150 high school seniors from various backgrounds getting ready to start college, I wasn't sure what message I would convey. Many of these students were first-generation Americans and would be the first in their family to even think about pursuing a college degree. Most of these students expressed fear and anxiety that not all students embarking on the road to college experience. I understood their apprehensions and I felt I needed to relay to them my personal experiences. My lessons were learned the hard way, and I wanted to protect these students so they wouldn't have to waste their time on losing confidence as I often had. I just knew that whatever words came out at the podium, they would have to serve the purpose of helping these students stand in a more self-confident position than when I first started college.

Gaps exist not only in the number of minorities that enroll in postsecondary programs in comparison to the general American population but also in the percentage of how many of these individuals actually attain their degrees.¹ According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center and the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, only about 20% of Latino Americans complete postsecondary programs.^{2,3} Part of the problems lie in the lack of support in the university setting and from equity discrepancies that are present in elementary and secondary education.⁴ I did not need to remind these high school seniors of the hindrances that contribute to this low percentage—they had first-

hand experience of economic challenges and lack of resources like adequate facilities and mentors. I did need to speak to them about the power that they possess to attain their goals despite their backgrounds, how people would underestimate them, and what they would be told they could or could not accomplish.

I am first generation Mexican American, and I grew up in a modest home in the South Side of Chicago. My parents came from humble means and had the limited opportunities that a sixth-grade education could grant them. When my parents immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, their ultimate goal was to ensure that their kids would attain an advanced education. It is with that mindset that they labored from dawn to dusk in the central California vineyards and orange orchards. It is that hard work ethic they instilled in my siblings and me that led us to achieve the ultimate American dream. My parents, who were regarded as just two field laborers, produced a registered nurse, a mechanical engineer, and two medical doctors. Despite our achievements, too many times we have been underestimated. Some awkward encounters were easier to laugh off, like when my dad was confused for being the gardener while mowing the lawn on our new home in the suburbs. Other incidents, however, were nothing short of exasperating, such as being asked whether or not I'm actually a doctor by strangers at social gatherings or being asked if I'm a legal citizen by a patient.

I have never been embarrassed of my upbringing and have always believed that I could achieve anything. Yet multiple times throughout

my education I have been made to feel inferior by my supervisors. For instance, a college advisor once stated to me that I would be accepted into medical school because institutions were being "paid" to accept poor Hispanic students like me. She failed to recognize my academic merit. On another occasion, an attending physician was visibly surprised that I could "speak well," given that English was a second language for me and I had a Chicago public school education. I have to admit that I have wasted time replaying these events in my mind and have let myself fall into self-doubt. Over the years, I have learned to let go of prejudice's effect on me. I remind myself that in the end I am the one that determines my fate.

When I spoke at the panel, I informed the students that there is simply no time for thoughts that will inevitably lead to doubting one's capabilities. I encouraged them to instead spend their time and energy on working towards their goals with complete dedication knowing that they had worked hard to deserve the opportunities that were being granted to them.

Whether or not we are the first in the family to attend college or whether or not the communities we live in will have faith in us, we must *never* let that hold us back or alter our self-image and worth. Whether we believe we can or cannot achieve a goal, we are right.

References

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