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School Smarts: A Reflection of Pedagogical and Personal Insights

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Recent studies show that many college instructors still believe that Latino students lack the “school smarts” for academic success. This essay challenges the notion of school smarts in order to highlight Latino students’ numerous strengths. I share my model for a mentorship program that facilitates better student–faculty communication and deepens a student-centered learning environment in a large general education course. Establishing the program led me to reflect on how the enduring belief in school smarts affected my own academic training. Directly challenging deficit thinking, I argue that Latino students contribute to a transformative educational process in which faculty are also learners.

Key words: postsecondary education, pedagogy, assessment, race/racialization, qualitative research, multiliteracies

It was in the middle of a run-of-the-mill faculty workshop when I heard the remark.

The time: February 2011. The setting: A forum at an urban public state university meant to bring together faculty from across departments to share strategies for enhancing student outreach and engagement. In casual conversation between presentations, my colleagues began to bemoan the rise of in-class texting and Web browsing, leading some to speculate whether this current generation of undergraduates lacks the maturity and academic preparation of its predecessors.

In this midst of this conversation, an Asian American faculty member from the college of education jumped at the chance to identify what she perceived as the especially woeful lack of preparation of Latino students in particular. Furious that this colleague would single out any ethnic group, I somehow managed to keep my calm as I objected, “You know, by focusing only on skills you think Latino students lack, you’re overlooking their many strengths. In fact, they bring to class many other forms of cultural capital that can be real assets to their learning.”

She immediately dismissed my response with an impatient sigh. “Yes, I guess you can say that Latino students have street smarts, not school smarts.”

And there it was—the remark. Without realizing it, she cut to the core of a brand of deficit thinking that has shaped Latino education experiences for decades by upholding two pernicious, intertwined ideas. First is the notion that underrepresented students lack “school smarts,” defined here as the rigorous academic preparation widely assumed to be the only reliable predictor of
academic success. Second is the concept that the skills and experience students of color do possess can be demeaned as belonging only to the “street,” a space that presumably exists apart from and has little bearing on the sacred scholarly activities of the classroom. “Street smarts” is thus a contemptuous term rooted in deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). It is a complete dismissal of what Yosso (2005) and others define as community cultural wealth, which includes navigational, familial, linguistic, and resistant forms of cultural capital, all of which enhance students’ intellectual journeys and deepen their skill sets in the classroom.

These assumptions play a critical role in today’s era of increased budget cuts and attacks on ethnic, Mexican American, and Chicano studies programs, assaults that are closely linked to growing anti-immigrant sentiment across the country. Within the academy, some folks find it all too easy to dismiss Latino and other underrepresented students as lost causes, which often translates into deprioritizing, defunding, and delegitimizing forms of support and outreach that are tailored to meet their needs. In this political climate, not only do I feel increasingly more protective of our first-generation and underrepresented college students, but also, as an untenured Latina professor, I am struck by my own vulnerability, wondering how and sometimes even if the university will support my advocacy efforts. In an era of ever-dwindling resources, what tools do I have to help students develop intellectual identities that respect and mesh with their personal identities rather than denigrate them?

In this essay, I share my experience of creating and implementing a mentoring program in a large general education Mexican American history course. It is a program that aims to foster a greater sense of community among the students and to facilitate an extended student-centered learning environment both in and out of the classroom in the hopes of increasing student engagement and, therefore, improving the retention rates of first-generation and Latino students at my university. In the second part of this essay, I reflect on a critical lesson I have learned from my engagement with the mentor program, namely the limits of those school smarts that some colleagues shortsightedly choose to exalt above all else.

GRADUATE MENTOR PROGRAM

In August 2008, I was a brand new tenure-track faculty member, excited and nervous to meet so many new students. One of my course assignments was to teach a section of Mexican American history, a year-long lower division general education course that has a typical enrollment of about 70 students in each section. This team-taught course is charged with covering vast historical eras; the fall takes students from the pre-Columbian civilizations to the end of the U.S. Civil War, a 1,000-year journey covered in just 16 weeks. The class always has the highest enrollment of any other course in the department and functions as an important gateway to interest students in our other course offerings.

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1 I understand that the use of the possessive to refer to students is problematic, for it often can denote condescension toward and/or a proprietary relationship with the young minds that we have the privilege to encounter in the classroom. Please note that in contrast to such usages, I apply our here with an orientation toward developmental leadership, responsibility, and reciprocity within a community composed of the faculty and students who participate in the mentor program described in this essay.
Because the history course covers so many general education requirements, it is overwhelm-
ingly composed of freshmen and sophomores who are still adjusting to college-level work and settling into our university community. Nearly 90% of the students in the course self-identify as Latino and are the very first in their families to enter a 4-year university. Many of them come directly from a K–12 educational experience that has not adequately prepared them for academic success at the university level; typically at least 20% of our students in any given semester have been assigned to “remedial” status in either English and/or math. Many have tremendous academic insecurities, a lasting remnant of interactions with previous educators and administrators who have told them that they cannot succeed. As a result, they frequently are reluctant to reach out for help. Many are satisfied if they earn a C–, and through the Spring 2008 semester, upward of 15% of students in our history course failed to do better. In fact, every semester, a portion of them would disappear after the first few weeks, never to be heard from again.

In response to these low retention rates for Latino students, my department began a collabora-
tive partnership with the Educational Opportunity Program in order to provide targeted outreach to first-generation students of color. In the week before my very first semester was to get under way, my department chair approached me with the opportunity to hire one of our master’s stu-
dents as a graduate mentor to support this collaboration. Because we did not begin with a firm model in mind, I was encouraged to shape the program and mentor role in any way that suited my section of the course. Once my pilot model was under way, we received additional funds to hire more mentors. Currently, as we finish the fifth full year of the program, we have achieved notable success, to the extent that the dean of our college has committed not only to preserving the program but also to expanding it to ensure that we can hire one mentor for every section of the course.

Core Elements of the Program

As the leader of the program—and through trial and error over the course of eight total semesters—I have assembled a set of five best practices. The most effective components of the mentor program include (a) a required one-on-one student meeting with the mentor within the first month of the semester; (b) a required office hour meeting with a faculty instructor to be fulfilled no later than the second month of the semester; (c) regular mentor office hours that greatly expand the days and hours of help available to students; (d) extra credit academic skills workshops on topics such as effective note taking, time management, and essay writing; and (e) community-building activities like movie nights and visiting local art exhibits related to course themes. We also solicit student feedback at three critical points in the semester. In the first week of class, we ask students to describe their academic strengths and to identify an area they seek to improve, as well as whether they have any suggestions for workshops or help topics they would like to see incorpor-
ated into the class. During the mid-semester period, we invite students to reflect on their interactions with the mentor and ask them whether they would like help developing a particular skill. Then at the end of the semester, we check whether students have met with the mentor beyond the required meeting and what impact the program had on their overall performance in the class. Finally, we schedule monthly team meetings for instructors and mentors from across the sections in order to discuss best practices, reflect on overall student progress, and share new ideas for the program.
Results of the Program and Sample Student Stories

The mentor program has been a success on many fronts. By the spring of 2010, when the program was fully implemented, 93% of students successfully completed the course with a grade of C+ or higher, up from 85% before the program came into existence. According to the same data, 97% of students who reported working with the mentor found that it was somewhat to very helpful in meeting their needs as students, and 89% found that it was somewhat to very important to their overall performance in the class. As a freshman that took the course in Fall 2010 explains,

This was actually my first college course, so I was scared just by walking in and seeing a lot of people in the classroom. . . . [Hearing] the word “professor” also threw me back a bit and hearing about a major project due also intimidated me. However I can truly say that I feel fortunate to have had [Mexican American history] as my first college course and to have you as my first professors. The class made my transition very smooth and attending the extra credit workshops really helped me to know what was expected in this course. [The mentor] also was a huge help and I really appreciate her giving up some time to help us.

From an instructor's perspective, the most meaningful result of the program is that it dramatically improves faculty–student communication. Because the mentor and I have so many one-on-one meetings, by the end of the semester we know every student’s name and are familiar with his or her general background and personal interests—even with such large enrollment in the class. As a result, we are able to foster a greater sense of community among the students and to facilitate an extended student-centered learning environment both in and out of the classroom. In a 70-student course, it is easy for students to feel anonymous and to feel that nobody will notice whether they are attending class. In fact, before we implemented the program, it was a challenge to track students who were struggling academically because they often just disappeared. By contrast, we now can identify them much earlier in the semester and, through our one-on-one meetings and personalized e-mails, remind them of the help and resources available to them, in addition to affirming our belief that they are capable of strengthening their skills and improving their current grades. The result has been improved attendance, higher retention, and overall better performance in the course for all students.

Both instructor and mentor meetings have given us valuable insights into the kinds of issues—academic, financial, family illness, and/or other responsibilities—that negatively impact our students over the course of the semester. For example, of the four students who did not complete my section of the course in Spring 2010, I know the direct causes leading to their withdrawals in three of the cases. One young woman battled both financial distress and a severe depression, another faced her grandfather’s near-fatal illness and tried her best to confer with me and create a plan to make up the work, and one young man admitted that he was simply embarrassed to have fallen behind on his assignments but hoped to make a plan to complete the work. I doubt that these students would have felt as comfortable opening up to me without having completed an office hours visit. One-on-one interactions can provide the foundation for a student–faculty relationship based on mutual respect and good communication.

The improved communication also enables me to identify candidates for various fellowships and, during class lectures, highlight information and learning materials that coincide with their interests. For example, one student told me of his interest in becoming a documentary filmmaker who specializes in Chicano history. Shortly before this student came to my office hours, I happened to have met a local Chicano filmmaker who produces his own films and was about to
embark on a new project. I contacted the filmmaker to set up a meeting between the two of them, and the student was hired as a production assistant on the project.

A sophomore whom I will call Lorenzo also comes to mind as a good example of the difference that can be made when we know our students well. Lorenzo was not on the official roster on the first day of class, yet he came to my office hours to make a case for why I should add him. I was struck by his determination—he was the only student who took such initiative and followed up with me outside of class—and I agreed to give him an add code. I was especially disappointed, then, to note in the early weeks of the semester that Lorenzo often had his head down on his desk during lecture and appeared to be sleeping. After receiving a third warning from me in class, he came to my office to apologize for his behavior. Lorenzo explained to me that he was the father of a newborn baby and was not getting adequate sleep as he struggled to stay on top of his schoolwork, a part-time job, and caring for his son. My annoyance quickly dissipated as he told me that he meant no disrespect and was dedicated to giving his full attention in class—even to the point of splashing cold water on his face to perk up! I also learned from the mentor that Lorenzo frequently met with her for help with his essays and to clarify his lecture notes. Without knowing Lorenzo so well, it would be tempting to read his behavior as the result of a poor attitude or lack of commitment to his education, although that is clearly far from the case.

Similarly, Alfredo is a student who made a very positive impression on me by being one of the first two students to meet with me in office hours during the second week of the semester. He told me how excited he was about his full course load and even asked me about the process of earning a PhD and becoming a professor. He also shared with me his concerns about staying on top of coursework while maintaining the full-time job he needed to help support his family, but seemed upbeat about his prospects. As the weeks went on, though, I grew concerned about Alfredo as he began missing class, at first just occasionally and then more frequently. He eventually came back to talk with me in office hours to apologize for his absences. Over the course of our conversation, I learned that Alfredo’s father did not support his decision to attend college; he expected Alfredo, as the eldest son, to take on a second full-time job in order to contribute to the family’s finances. His father frequently called upon him to do maintenance work at one of the family’s rental properties, despite Alfredo’s insistence that he had to attend class. Fortunately, he was able to complete all of his coursework, thanks to following up with the mentor on his missing notes. In this situation, it would have been easy to assume the worst about Alfredo and read his behavior as actions that confirm Latino students’ supposed lack of preparation. Such misreading is what opens the door to deficit thinking, as exemplified by my colleague’s remark at the faculty forum.

**SIMPLE—YET POWERFUL—ACTS**

I realize that the program I have described is a significant time investment for faculty members who already are stretched in so many directions—especially junior faculty of color who face additional pressures (Urrieta & Chávez, 2010). At the university where I teach, the standard course load for faculty is four classes per semester, and because my home department is small, we tend to have more service assignments compared to colleagues in larger departments, where there are more people to fill the various positions. The only way that I have been able to get the mentor program started is through a number of course releases, some offered as part of my hiring contract and others that have come through competitive funding opportunities at the institution. Although
my home university cannot boast of Ivy League resources and endowments, I have been fortunate to work with a department chair who is a valuable mentor, helping me learn how to prioritize my commitments and evaluate which service opportunities make the best use of my time and how to locate course release opportunities at our university. Because of his guidance and workload advice, every semester I have managed to meet one on one with nearly 70 students (not to mention the students in my other courses), oversee all four sections of the history course, train the mentors, and facilitate monthly meetings to track mentors’ activities and undergraduates’ progress.

What can young Latina faculty member do even without such a program in place? I have found that often the simplest acts are the ones that can yield the greatest rewards. If nothing else, it is absolutely necessary for us to get to know our students better and to take an active interest in their lives. The less we generalize or make assumptions about students’ personal backgrounds and journeys to college, and the more we make an effort to get to know them on an individual basis, the better we are positioned to appreciate the collective cultural capital they bring to the classroom.

As a starting point, I have found that requiring students to visit office hours once per semester, as an assignment, is particularly important in lower division courses. What is interesting is that one of my fellow instructors in the history course has raised objections on this point: An important part of the college experience, he argues, is for students to learn through their own volition the value of meeting with professors. Though I believe that this is an important point for students to arrive at eventually, I have found that first-generation students need a bit of support to develop this practice. The mentor program’s insistence on this practice is rooted in an attempt to break away from such traditional views and get our students to meet with us through any means necessary.

I also make it a point to create a “getting-to-know-you” questionnaire for students at the start of each semester, a teaching tip I learned prior to my tenure-track appointment, when I was a postdoctoral teaching fellow at a private RU/VH institution (research university with very high research activity, according to the Carnegie Foundation classification system). Instructors were encouraged to ask students for, in addition to their basic contact info, a list of their favorite movies, books, and extracurricular activities as a way to get to know them beyond the classroom. At my current institution, however, I realized that I needed much more important, practical information to help me reach out to our student population.

My updated getting-to-know-you questionnaire asks students whether they work part or full time and whether they have a parent who graduated from college. Even just asking the most basic getting-to-know-you questions can be a powerful act: “Where did you grow up?” “Did you consider other colleges when you were applying to school?” “Is there something in particular that brought you here?” Through this second question, I have learned that a number of students aspired to one of the many local private universities yet did not receive the necessary financial aid. One important question centers on whether family or work obligations may impact students during the semester. The students’ responses are revealing:

- “No, my parents want school to be my main focus, but I feel that I need to get a job to help them out a little.”
- “I pick up my brothers from school when I am able to. I work four days out of the week.”
- “My family is planning to visit this summer for my sister’s quinceañera. To show them a good time, I am planning to put in as many hours this semester as I can and save money to be able to help them have a nice vacation here.”
• “Yes, unfortunately, my mom lost her job last semester so I now help my parents pay their rent. I took a good job at the beginning of this year, but it requires me to be at work a lot and it comes with a lot of responsibilities. Nonetheless, I will do my best to not let my situation affect me as much as it did last semester.”
• “I work part time to help my mom out so she doesn’t have to support me 100%. I try to buy my own food and my own clothes and everything in between.”

Through a better understanding of the multiple roles and responsibilities the students are juggling, I have developed the utmost respect for their incredible tenacity. They take on a great deal of responsibility in order to contribute to their families’ well-being even while they enroll in a full course load. Moreover, they rightly take much pride in doing so. Thus, to use the derogatory term street smarts not only betrays a profoundly limited comprehension of students’ struggles but also denies the richness of their experience and the cultural wealth they bring to the classroom.

Another question that I have learned much from is “Tell me something special or unique about you, or something that you’re proud to have accomplished.” By far, the most common answer is that students are proud to be the first in their families to pursue a college degree, and often they are the first to have received a high school diploma. On a similar note, the students are excited to be enrolled in college and pursuing a bachelor of arts degree. They have mentioned having pride in overcoming learning disabilities; having immigrated from Mexico at an early age; being able to find a balance between school and work; returning from academic probation with renewed focus; enjoying fluency in three languages, such as English, Spanish, and Zapotec; having won medals in competitive sports and academic honors... the list is enormous. Again, to scorn as merely a form of street smarts the numerous hurdles students have overcome and successes they hold dear hardly does justice to their educational experiences (Hurtado, Cervantez, & Eccleston, 2010).

REFRAMING SCHOOL SMARTS: IDENTIFYING THE LIMITS OF AN RU/VH EDUCATION

The more questions I ask—not to mention the far fewer assumptions I make—has enabled me to overcome what was my biggest challenge in settling into my home campus: learning about our students’ realities and creating ways to structure into my course the support they most need. It is at this point that I wish to return to the notion of school smarts that opened this essay. I want to propose a reframing of the concept, one that admits that there is a critical flipside to those highly regarded bells and whistles proffered by an RU/VH education. Indeed, I hope to open a discussion that acknowledges the ways in which those programs create newly minted PhDs who are dramatically underprepared to be effective instructors for student bodies who are increasingly diverse in their ethnoracial, class, and educational backgrounds.

I was particularly troubled by my colleague’s insensitive assessment of Latino street smarts because she is both in the field of education and an Asian American woman. I would hope that she would be more attuned to the many different forms of knowledge students may possess, if not based on her personal experience then certainly through her chosen area of expertise. Yet as scholarship continues to demonstrate, my colleague is clearly not unique in her views: Cultural deficit paradigms remain in use and are in fact seeing a resurgence (Valencia, 2010; Zarate & Conchas, 2010).
Moreover, on a personal level, I must admit that although I myself was a first-generation Latina college student, my educational journey was markedly different than those of the students whom I teach. I am more than a little embarrassed to admit that the differences between us were something I rarely reflected on before I began working at my current institution. I arrived at this realization with a shock: I am someone who researches the rise of deficit thinking in the early 20th century, who brings a commitment to addressing those legacies in the subject matter that I teach, and who has been an advocate for diversity on every campus with which I have been affiliated. Nevertheless, I still did not understand that my educational experience left me unable to see the variety of pathways most Latino students must take to higher education (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), especially in today’s realities of diminishing support for higher education, rising college costs, and drastic cuts in classes and enrollments. The recognition of this point means that, for me, school smarts in the most literal sense: It has left a painful gap.

When I was in the job market, I was quite surprised when my graduate advisor warned me that my doctoral degree from a private RU/VH might be perceived as a liability, to some extent, during the campus interview at what is now my home institution. As he predicted, my would-be colleagues asked me point blank if I truly was prepared to work with the students who attend our university—students who, they were careful to point out, were neither better nor worse, just very different from the students whom I taught during my postdoctoral fellowship. I answered in the affirmative, emphasizing my genuine passion for teaching, and feel fortunate that they offered me the opportunity to work alongside them.

I was blessed to have been trained at private RU/VH institutions throughout my four baccalaureate years, seven more in my doctoral program, and three additional ones in the post-doc. In fact, I likely would not be in my current tenure-track position if it were not for the many wonderful opportunities such educational institutions offered to me. Yet those 14 years put a set of blinders on me; all of the students whom I encountered during that time were ones who seemed to have academic success come relatively easily to them and who had encountered supportive teachers and mentors from an early age. For a long time, I assumed that all students receive scholarships and adequate financial aid, all can afford to live on campus and thus fully immerse themselves in campus life, and all are introduced to the idea of pursuing advanced degrees. I rarely came into contact with any students who did not fit that model. I certainly was aware of and acutely felt the particular challenges that minority and first-generation students face, but special programs like the one that began grooming me to consider an academic career helped me to find support networks and to feel connected to school through developing my own research projects.

Moreover, looking back I now realize that I attended college in an era before the rise of student-centered pedagogy. Most of my college courses were discussion based; either one completed the assigned reading and contributed to discussion or one sat at the back of the room and tried to avoid the professor’s gaze. There were rarely different activities, small-group discussions, or in-class writing assignments to help us organize our thoughts. The only creative or group assignments I encountered were in my foreign language courses. In the classes in which I rarely spoke, not a single professor ever reached out to me after class to ask why I had not participated or to explain the importance of contributing to class discussions as a way to think aloud and develop my ideas. I often heard about “office hours,” but as a first-generation student I had no idea why I should go or what I might talk about with a professor. It was entirely a sink-or-swim context; either one possessed those imaginary school smarts or one just fell behind.
Even when I received my training as a teaching assistant in graduate school, topics such as pedagogical theories, different learning styles, and even educational pipeline issues were rarely, if ever, mentioned. The assumption of many faculty members with whom I trained was that I would go on to teach at a similar research university and continue working with students who were “easy” to teach because they came to college with those privileged school smarts. In such an environment, the idea that some students have the skills to succeed academically while others simply do not means that there is little need for faculty to examine their own pedagogical approaches in and beyond the classroom. This unreflective atmosphere perpetuates deficit thinking: Student failures continue to be understood as a reflection of their poor abilities—not of a broader academic culture that creates and perpetuates inequities.

Therefore, it was only relatively recently that I began to reflect more critically on my complicated positioning vis-à-vis the students who enroll in my courses. There are many characteristics I share with them: I am also a person of color, grew up in a working-class family, and am the first person in my family to attend college. Yet we are dramatically different. I was fortunate to have received a full-tuition scholarship to a private university and needed loans only to cover my room and board; by contrast, our students must work part or full time to contribute to or altogether pay for their tuition. In addition, whereas my parents were in a position to make school my only “job” within our family, our students often juggle significant family and work obligations in addition to their coursework. I also enjoyed the luxury of living on campus, which enabled me to get fully involved in campus life, whereas most of our students live at home and commute to campus out of financial necessity. Finally, whereas my parents were born in the United States and had experienced the American educational system, they were able to provide more support as I applied to college; in contrast, a great number of our students are part of the first generation in their families to have been born and educated in the United States and must navigate those cultural frontiers every day.

Time and again, our students demonstrate their tenacity by remaining open to sharing their struggles and achievement with the instructors and mentors in our pilot program, and I am so thankful to them for doing so. In doing so, they are contributing to a transformative educational process in which we as faculty are also learners. Through the privilege of working with them, I have come to understand that the fictional school smarts that lead to our securing tenure-track positions also have the potential, if we are not cautious, to lead us further away from the possibility of connecting with our students and even recognizing, let alone appreciating, the wealth of concrete experience, skills, and cultural capital they bring to every class. The only way around this hurdle is to make active attempts to reach out to our students. Though it is an effort that pushes our specialized training to the limits of its creativity and imagination, we simply cannot afford to do otherwise.

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