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### **Understanding the Challenges of English Language Learners and Increasing College-Going Culture: Suggestions for School Counselors**

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#### **Abstract**

English language learners (ELLs) represent a growing population in the U.S. K–12 system. Research has shown that these students face many challenges that affect their trajectory to college. The challenges include, but are not limited to, issues related to academics, socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and socio-emotional strains. This article explores the many obstacles ELLs face that affect their college/career access and attainment and provides suggestions for school counselors working with ELLs to increase their college-going culture.

*Keywords:* English language learners, immigrants, college counseling, college-going culture

English language learners (ELLs) is a term used to refer to students who receive any language assistance program (Cook, 2015). ELLs in the United States are a diverse group who speak hundreds of different languages from many parts of the world; they differ in ethnicity, culture, educational background, and socioeconomic status (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). In addition, not all ELLs are immigrants; some are born and raised in the United States (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). Although ELLs come from different backgrounds, it is important to note that the largest group of ELLs in the

United States are Spanish-speaking students (Winsler et al., 2014). In addition, ELLs are said to be the fastest growing group of students in K–12 education (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). The U.S Department of Education (2006) predicted that ELLs will represent 25% of students by 2025 (as cited in Kanno & Cromley, 2015). The number of ELLs enrolled in public schools doubled between 1997 and 2008 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010; Winsler, Kim, & Richard, 2014). In the 2005–2006 school year, there were an estimated 5.1 million ELLs in our public schools (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). Regardless of where they are born, ELLs face many obstacles relating to their access to higher education. They oftentimes fall behind and fail to be college and career ready. They are notably less likely to both enroll and attain a postsecondary education (Kanno & Cromley, 2015).

Yet, there is a lack of literature regarding effective ways to guide ELLs to higher education and how to get them college and career ready. The existing, yet very limited, studies that focus on school counselors working with ELLs focus largely on Latino/a students (Cook, 2015). Still, there is a lack of guidance for school counselors to effectively work through the college-going process of all ELLs, regardless of their background (Cook, Pérusse, & Rojas, 2015). School counselors are critical to college-going success and trajectory to college.

The purpose of this article is to briefly discuss some of the obstacles faced by ELLs that impact their college opportunities. The authors discuss the challenges faced and provide suggestions to aid school counselors in creating a more college-going culture for ELLs. Specifically, we discuss pertinent laws that impact ELLs, obstacles pertaining to academics, socio-emotional strains, socioeconomic status, immigration status, and parental involvement. Finally, we offer various suggestions for school counselors.

### **Laws/Policies Affecting English Language Learners**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; Title VII), enacted in 1967, held states and districts accountable to improve the English language skills of ELLs (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2002, provided funding for bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) programs. Though NCLB provided support for ELLs (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009), it also required that ELLs partake in yearly assessments to test their English language skills and academic content knowledge (Menken, 2010). In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education stated that all ELL's are required to take these exams after one year of living in the United States (Menken, 2010). However, after only one year of entering the United States, newcomers are not linguistically prepared to partake in these national assessments (Menken, 2010). With the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), schools have the choice to either continue testing ELLs as it is done under NCLB or test students in math and reading (Klein, 2015). Content exams necessary for students to pass are based on Standard American English, which ELLs are not able to manage (Menken, 2010). Therefore, the results may be negatively impacted not because of the lack of content knowledge but because of the lack of language understanding (Cook et al., 2015). The assessment results shed light to the low academic achievement levels of ELLs across the United States (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009).

The fact that ELLs are underperforming in assessments does not mean they are less knowledgeable or less able, it solely means they are still learning English and language is posing a barrier in their performance scores. With the rise of high-stakes testing, language has been seen as a problem due to the lower test scores of newcomer students who do not speak English (Baker, 2011). Unfortunately, under NCLB, if students do not show progress in yearly standardized tests, schools may face closures or the loss of federal funding (Menken, 2010). Often this problem is solely attributed to newcomer ELLs, though there are also U.S. born students who enter public schools with limited English language skills (Baker, 2011). With the passage of ESSA, schools have an option on when to apply ELLs assessments scores to their school rating—include the assessment scores of ELLs who have been in the country only a year for school rating purposes or have ELLs partake in the reading and math assessment but not count the scores in the first year. In the second year, the scores would have to show some progress, and in the third year the scores would be treated as any other student for school rating purposes (Klein, 2015). School counselors need to pay special attention to these obstacles ELLs face and provide necessary preventive and intervention plans to combat these challenges. School counselors will also need to advocate for better services for these students (Morrison et al., 2016).

### **Obstacles to College Access for English Language Learners**

ELLs enter a system that believes they should learn English at the expense of their academics (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). According to the American Youth Policy Forum (2009), “When ELLs enter public schools, they face the dual challenges of learning a new language while keeping up with the academic content of their grade level” (p. 2). Further, they are tracked into ESL classes and left out of academic tracks, which leaves them isolated from their native English-speaking peers (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). The effects of the many disadvantages ELLs face in and outside of school are evident when comparing the access and attainment of higher education between ELLs and monolingual English-speaking students. ELLs are less likely to attend a higher education institution than their monolingual counterparts (Cook, 2015). When ELLs are restricted from rigorous curricula, they are more likely than English-proficient students or English-monolingual students to attend a two-year institution rather than a four year college (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). ELLs are more likely to not transfer to a four-year institution than their native counterparts and more likely to not finish their degrees (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Regrettably, it is estimated that 70% of students who start at two-year colleges do not go on to a four-year institution. Kanno and Cromley (2015) reported that only 18% of ELLs enter a four-year institution compared to 43% of monolingual students and 38% of English-proficient linguistic minority students (students who master the English language but speak a non-English language at home). Furthermore, only 12% of those students attain their four-year degree within eight years of high school graduation compared to 32% of their monolingual counterparts and 25% of English-proficient students (Kanno & Cromley, 2015).

As noted, the access and attainment of higher education for ELLs is significantly lower; therefore, school counselors should be aware of the challenges faced by ELLs that affect their trajectory to college and find ways to rectify them. In line with the three

domains of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model (i.e., academic, career, and social/emotional), school counselors need to prepare all students to be career and college ready and to succeed academically (ASCA, 2012). This includes students who are ELLs, regardless of their nationality. If school counselors do not take action to assess the academic experience of ELLs, they risk not giving due diligence towards the ethical standards of the counseling professions (ASCA, 2012).

It is important to encourage ELLs to attend college, as higher education has been associated with better economic outcomes, better health, and more active civic participation (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). The United States would benefit from having ELLs attend college, as it is currently not producing enough college graduates to preserve its competitive power over other developed nations (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). President Obama recognized the need of having more college graduates by creating the American Graduation Initiative to increase the number of community college graduates by 5 million by 2020 (Kanno & Grosik, 2012; Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, 2009). It is important to recognize that none of these initiatives would be possible if we do not address the needs of ELLs in their trajectory to college (Kanno & Grosik, 2012).

### **Academic**

Garrett and Holcomb (2005) found that schools, for the most part, are not prepared to work with ELLs. Moreover, schools are often in denial as to the magnitude of ELLs and their many challenges; this continues until it is too late to provide services and assist these students (Lee, 2012). Additionally, schools fail to invest enough in resources for ESL programs (Lee, 2012). Based on the lack of support and resources to assist ELLs, these students are often in a pivotal place to fail (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). When ELLs enter public education, language acquisition takes precedent over academic content (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009; Kanno & Cromley, 2015). For example, because ELLs struggle to excel in the English language, they are often underprepared in their college essay writing, which directly affects the college application process (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Further, limited English language skills also negatively affect the scores of entrance exams such as the SATs which limits entrance to selective institutions (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). In addition to lack of preparation, there is a misconception that ELLs are not qualified for higher education (Kanno & Cromley, 2015).

Academic preparation is one of the most important factors in predicting college access and success. Unfortunately, ELLs continue to be underprepared for college. The results from the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that in a 500 point assessment, there was a 55 point difference between 12th-grade ELLs and non-ELLs in reading and a 44 point difference in mathematics (as cited in Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Thus, in general, ELLs' assessment results are lower than their monolingual counterparts. Additionally, ELLs have a higher dropout rate; in 2007, 21% of foreign-born students dropped out compared to 8% of their native-born peers (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009).

School counselors need to advocate for English as a new language (ENL) classes for students who need this resource to competently learn English as well as advocate for students to have access to advanced classes when appropriate. When students do not have access to advanced classes, it impacts the opportunities for students to partake in college preparatory courses and lowers academic achievements (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). For

instance, in high school, ELLs enroll in AP classes by a third less than their native counterparts. Hence, ELLs in advanced courses are the exception and not the rule (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Since school counselors have access to students' academic records, they are instrumental in promoting ELLs who have demonstrated the ability to highly perform in their classes and should have access to advanced courses (Cook et al., 2015). Counselors may also ask teachers to identify and recommend students to honor or AP classes when appropriate. Further, according to Menken and Kleyn (2010), there is an inadequate implementation of researched-based best practices to foster ELLs' English attainment and proficiency. Menken and Kleyn also stated that the lack of resources results in ELLs staying in ESL programs semi-permanently. Thus, the longer they remain not reclassified from ESL, the longer they are restricted from rigorous curricula (Kanno & Cromley, 2015).

Another group of students who school counselors need to be aware of and be proactive in helping are the late-entrant ELLs, a unique sub-population of ELL students who begin to learn English during their high school years (Lee, 2012). Lee (2012) explained that late-entrant ELLs do not have enough time to learn academic English. He noted that the language acquisition process of academic English can take 4–7 years. Thus, late entrant ELLs do not have enough time to acquire the necessary English language skills to succeed (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Winsler et al. (2014) purported that students who become proficient in English early on in their educational careers perform noticeably better in school as opposed to students who begin in high school (Kanno & Harklau, 2012). When students begin to learn English after elementary school, they have a difficult time catching up with their classmates (Kanno & Harklau, 2012). Thus, they are underprepared for college and struggle in national assessments; they linger with difficulty to gather graduation requirements. A growing number of these immigrant students have experienced interrupted formal education, increasing the gap between them and their native counterparts by two or more years (Advocates for Children, 2010). These students at times are not literate in their native language, thus making it more difficult to acquire English language skills (Lee, 2012).

### **Socio-Emotional**

Bilingual children have shown advantages in various domains of cognitive functioning (Winsler et al., 2014). However, the process before ELLs become proficient in English presents them with various socio-emotional challenges. That is, students with limited English language skills who have a thicker accent are subject to discrimination, ridicule, and harassment from students, teachers, and school administration (Peguero, 2008). These emotional factors related to racism and discrimination negatively impact the academic achievement of ELLs (Cook, 2015). Adding on to ELLs' stress level is that they have to stand as interpreters for their parents, who typically learn English at a slower rate than their children. Having this responsibility often causes children to feel nervous and embarrassed (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014). Additionally, ELLs are known to have a variety of responsibilities at home from child care to having to provide economically to help their families (Perez, 2009). These different living situations force students to be very independent (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011), which creates a strain in the family dynamics and causes children to feel resentment toward parents and experience acculturation stress, depression, and anxiety, possibly leading to aggression and

delinquency (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014). On the other hand, ELLs are known to value education and, despite their various disadvantages, become resilient individuals and prioritize their education (Perez, 2009).

School counselors also need to be aware of ELLs who are recent immigrants and who face a few added psychological strains that derive from migration. Being expected to leave one's home and restart a new life in a strange place is hard enough, but experiencing that change as a child or adolescent is additionally burdensome (Pong & Hao, 2007). Aside from the strain of entering a new school in a new country, they are faced with long separations from families and the loss of leaving their home country behind (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Pong & Hao, 2007). Every student's migration story is different, but it is important to note that a subgroup of these students may be experiencing the effects of trauma (Acuña & Escudero, 2015). Further, in recent years, there has been an increase of unaccompanied minors from Central America who have experienced extreme violence, a difficult migration path (crossing border), detention centers, and sexual abuse on top of the common emotional strains of migration (Acuña & Escudero, 2015), as well as refugee children from other parts of the world whose pre-migration experiences and resettlement circumstances present significant psychological distress (Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). For this subgroup of ELLs, trauma can affect every aspect of their lives including pleasure, engagements, control, and trust (Acuña & Escudero, 2015). These are important issues that school counselors need to be aware of so that they can provide the psychological support for these students.

### **Socioeconomic**

Approximately 75% of ELLs come from low-income families (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Thus, the majority are from families who are members of the working class and who attend under-resourced schools in urban areas (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). Considering these additional challenges, low income ELLs struggle to afford the rising tuition of higher education, which may impede ELLs from attending college (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Based on the obstacles involved in getting a higher education, ELLs may not likely attend a four-year college, although getting a bachelor's degree is one of the most effective ways to get out of poverty (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). The high cost of higher education will affect academic and economic choices for ELLs (Kanno & Grosik, 2012).

### **Immigration Status**

As many ELLs are immigrants, legal status may be an issue when thinking about college (Perez, 2009). Undocumented ELLs face challenges that are additionally burdensome. Though there is no knowledge of how many ELLs are undocumented, 31% of all the youth eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are limited English proficient (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Catastrophically, only 10–20% of undocumented students who graduate from U.S. high schools continue on to college (Perez, 2009). Undocumented students are not eligible for financial aid or student loans, and they are limited in their selection of careers (Morrison et al., 2016). Being undocumented means that ELLs will have a difficult time accessing higher education institutions. As a response, some states have created policies to help their undocumented students attend college in the form of charging in-state tuition regardless of legal status

(Nienhusser, 2013). The remaining states charge out-of-state tuition, regardless of how many years immigrant youth resided in that state. This makes it difficult for undocumented students to think of college due to the high costs (Perez, 2009).

### **Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement is continuously shown to be an issue for ELLs (Cook et al., 2015). Parents of ELLs are shown to have received less education than parents of non-ELLs and thus are less able to guide students in their postsecondary education (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Only 22% of ELLs' parents have a postsecondary degree compared to 44% of non-ELLs' parents (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). In a study performed by Kanno and Cromley (2013), parents of ELLs on average received a score of 2.19 for their educational level compared to 3.13 for parents of non-ELLs, with "2" demonstrating high school graduation and "3" demonstrating less than two years of college. This means ELLs do not have parents who are able to guide them through their college and career exploration. However, this does not mean that parents of ELLs have lower expectations of their children or that they do not want to be involved in their education, it solely means they may not be knowledgeable on how to effectively participate in their students' education (Delgado, Huerta, & Campos, 2012). Delgado et al. (2012), also studied this phenomenon and explained the importance of getting parents to be involved in schools. They found that parents tend to not be involved because they are concerned with their own academic and language skills. Also, it is important to recognize that different cultures conceptualize parental involvement in different ways that may not exactly be what U.S. schools need (Delgado et al., 2012). Additionally, ELLs tend to attend underfunded schools where guidance may not be adequately provided (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). Thus, ELLs lack access to appropriate guidance from parents and/or educators. These are important issues that must be considered as school counselors think about ways in which they can involve ELL parents.

### **Suggestions for School Counselors**

School counselors play a vital role in the academic trajectory, college-going process, and career success of underserved students (Morrison et al., 2016; Nienhusser, 2013). Yet, many times school counselors lack the time or information to work with underserved populations such as ELLs. In a response to the lack of information available to school counselors on how to effectively help ELLs get to college, the following suggestions were gathered.

First, ELLs face many academic obstacles. They enter a system that often excludes them from college preparatory courses (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). To rectify this phenomenon, school counselors should advocate for students to have a fair chance at taking Advanced Placement courses or courses that give college credit (Cook et al., 2015). Doing so will lower the cost of college and improve college readiness (Perez, 2010). It is important to reframe the approach to ELLs from deficit based to asset based (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). When talking to students about their college choices, school counselors may consider the fact that institutions look at ELLs differently; for example, some institutions do not give credit for ESL classes, adding to costs (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Thus, counselors can help students weigh their options by

comparing how colleges view and treat their ELLs. This way, counselors can serve as mentors and advocates to encourage academic success (Cook et al., 2015).

Another important issue that school counselors need to focus on is the fact that many ELLs do not have college information (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). They often lack necessary information about the college-going process (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Therefore, based on the language barriers and lack of information, school counselors must explain the college-going process to ELLs in appropriate language and with a vast amount of information on the background of the U.S. education system (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Having limited information may also affect the financial aid students receive (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). For example, ELLs may require school counselors to sit down with them to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), as just pointing them to the Web site may not be enough (Kanno & Grosik, 2012). Kim (2012) detailed the lesson plan of a four-week college and career planning research project that helped ELLs learn the importance of college and career planning and also improve their writing and researching skills. In this project, students were expected to write about their career goals, research institutions for their careers and the college application process, and create a financial plan. Research has highlighted the significance of educating not only students but also parents about the college-going process (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). School counselors may also set up hands-on workshops for students and parents to carefully walk them through the application process, including financial aid, and to provide translators when necessary (Kanno & Grosik, 2012).

Third, when working with ELLs, school counselors should pay extra attention to those students who may be undocumented; they should address short- and long-term goals and educate them about their rights and available resources (Morrison et al., 2016). It is important for school counselors to go above and beyond for students who may be undocumented, as they face extraneous difficulties when planning for college. Undocumented ELL students will benefit from learning about available resources, such as scholarships that do not have residency requirements, and eligibility requirements for in-state tuition (Cook et al., 2015). Moreover, school counselors must stay up to date on legislation that affects undocumented college-bound students (Morrison et al., 2016). Nienhusser (2013) highlighted the role of school counselors in the college choice of undocumented students. He recommended for school counselors to engage students in one-on-one counseling, various college presentations, extensive and intentional curriculum, and outreach plus delivery of resources such as scholarships.

Fourth, parental involvement is another issue for most ELLs, where parents are unable to be involved in school for various reasons. Whether parents are not involved due to late work hours or fear, school counselors should make an effort to increase parental involvement (Cook et al., 2015). Providing workshops (Kanno & Grosik, 2012) and parent nights (Cook et al., 2015) are a vital component to build rapport with parents of ELLs. Which in turn may provide a welcoming atmosphere for parents. School counselors should give a chance for the parents to provide input, share their thoughts, questions and concerns about the college and career transition (Cook et al., 2015). Lastly, collaboration between the school and community can create more resources for parental involvement (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009).

Fifth, ELLs, regardless of status or background, may face various socio-emotional strains such as discrimination and bullying. It is important to consider these as they may influence the daily academic life of ELLs. The StopBullying.gov (n.d.) initiative provides guidelines for school counselors who need strategies to prevent and deal with bullying. An additional strategy that can be useful to school counselors is storytelling. According to Enciso (2011), storytelling is a powerful tool to use with immigrant youth, including those who are ELLs; this allows the students to be validated and engage with others in the school building. School counselors should always be respectful of the unique cultural backgrounds, cultural heritage, and values of ELLs (Cook et al., 2015). Students dealing with the effects of trauma may benefit from the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBIT) program, which includes group interventions, psychoeducation, relaxation training, cognitive therapy, trauma exposure, social problem solving, and teacher and parent sessions (Santiago, Lennon, Fuller, Brewer, & Kataoka, 2014). Many ELLs learn from their experiences and use them as a catalyst for success (Perez, 2009).

Finally, in order to increase the college-going culture among ELLs, it is important to be aware of their college-going process. In a five-step process of college planning, consisting of (1) aspiring to college, (2) acquiring college qualifications, (3) graduating from high school, (4) applying to college, and (5) enrolling in college, ELLs begin to fall behind in the first step; that is, they begin to fall behind during the college aspiration and planning stage (Kanno & Cromley, 2015). To resolve this problem, it may be beneficial for ELLs to hear the stories of successful ELL graduates, where they can relate to their challenges and learn from the successes (Cook et al., 2015). Former ELLs who have become professionals should be invited to talk to current ELLs to discuss college and career (Cook et al., 2015). Not only will ELLs learn from both graduates and professional speakers, but they will also gain role models that may shape their academic careers. School counselors should hold high expectations and standards for their ELLs and encourage others to do the same (American Youth Policy Forum, 2009). The new House Bill 1541 was created in Washington state to further close the educational gap of certain students, including ELLs, in that it provides strategies to better serve ELLs (Korman, 2016). The legislation instructs teachers to be certified in bilingual or ELL education, states to provide assistance and support for schools serving ELLs, and schools with high numbers of ELLs to provide appropriate cultural professional development for their staff (Korman, 2016).

Many researchers recognize that there is an inadequate student-to-school counselor ratio, where school counselors have an extraordinarily high amount of students and ELLs may not receive the right amount of attention (Cook et al., 2015; Kanno & Grosik, 2012). School counselors should seek the contribution of teachers to identify ELLs who may be struggling in order to address their challenges (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011). It is recommended that teachers be involved in the college guidance process; school counselors may request the help of teachers in motivating and providing information to ELLs (Cook et al., 2015; Kanno & Grosik, 2012). As school counselors, it is common to encounter challenging cases where students do not respond to many attempts of engagement. It is always helpful to ask colleagues, such as other school counselors or supervisors, for input and help reaching out to students (Cook et al., 2015). Solution-focused counseling interventions, such as focusing on a specific problem, areas

of strengths, and previous successes, have shown to be effective ways to engage challenging cases where students are non-compliant in class: Focusing on success can increase academic self-efficacy (Cook et al., 2015).

### **Conclusion**

ELLs experience distinctive challenges that prove to be burdensome, such as challenges related to academics, socioeconomic status, immigration status, parental involvement, and socio-emotional strains. These obstacles make it difficult for ELLs to think of their future without questioning their possibilities. This article discussed the challenges that affect ELLs' trajectory to college. As counselors, it is important to understand that ELLs face an extraneous amount of obstacles that decrease their higher education opportunities. Likewise, it is extremely important to be aware of strategies that can be used to support ELLs in their trajectory to college. In response, the recommendations provided can help counselors rectify some of the burdensome situations ELLs face and positively shape their view of the future. However, this article only covers the basics of each challenge and provides the basis for schools counselors to handle students who come into U.S. high schools for the first time and need to meet graduation requirements, learn English, and figure out their higher education path. Current and future school counselors may use this article to not only learn about the challenges of ELLs and how those affect their academic trajectory, but also gain new effective ways in working with English language learners.

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