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The Importance of Networking and Supportive Staff for Latina/o First-Generation Students and their Families as they Transition to Higher Education

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Abstract

Using qualitative research methods, this study sought to contextualize the ways resources for first-generation college students work in isolation rather than in partnership. Based on in-depth iterative interviews with Latina/o students and parents, this study aimed to capture how participants' experiences influenced their opportunities to pursue a college education. Using a Community Cultural Wealth framework, we sought to identify and understand the mechanisms through which to better support Latina/o first-generation students as they transition to college. Findings suggest the need to expose youth to college culture early in their academic trajectories and continue to build on their knowledge base every year throughout their college career.

Introduction

With colleges and universities making major strides towards access to postsecondary education for all students in recent decades, it is tempting for educators to assume that such progress has erased disparities in college enrollment and completion in the United States. Yet, despite the United States having one of the highest college participation rates in the world, large gaps persist in terms of academic success in higher education, particularly for low-income, underrepresented, first-generation college students (Tinto, 2005).

Although access to higher education has increased, student success and greater equality in the attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). More than 40% of incoming community college freshmen are considered underprepared and must enroll in at least one developmental reading, writing, or mathematics course (Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010). As many as 60% of incoming students at community colleges require at least one developmental (or basic skills) course, and many drop out before receiving a credential, often because they never progress beyond developmental courses (Scrivener, 2008). In California alone, 75% of community college students are identified as "not ready" for college-level math or English (Engstrom, 2008). The number of underprepared students creates a problem for postsecondary education in general because student preparation is an important predictor of completing a college degree (Engstrom, 2008; Offenstein & Shulock, 2010; Pascarella & Tarenzini, 1991). Additionally, student preparation is an indicator marking whether a student will be likely to transfer and how long it will take a student to meet the requirements necessary to be able to transfer.

Furthermore, the increased access to post-secondary education that community colleges offer has not always translated into individual access for students. Consequently, colleges are forced to figure out the most effective way to support students who have to enroll in developmental coursework before they can ever reach transfer-level courses, since developmental coursework has become a serious barrier to success for many students (Pascarella & Tarenzini, 1991). Based on the knowledge that many students enter college insufficiently prepared, community colleges across the country have focused on how to facilitate the process for students to attain academic success through participation in learning communities (Kozeracki, 2002; Tinto, 2005).

To address the academic success disparity among first-generation college students entering higher education, this study examines the skills needed to help them persist within a post-secondary education context. Specifically, this study focuses on first-generation Latino college students that participate in first-year experience programs within learning communities that bridge the gap between home communities and institutional services providing resources to Latino students. Focusing on the success of first-year experience programs will allow for the examination of the role of learning communities in creating environments that foster student success (Cross, 1998; Jaffe, 2004; Knight, 2003; Schroeder & Hurst, 1996). To address the

educational disparities that exist we ask, how do institutions address the needs of first-generation college students? Further, how do institutions contextualize the ways resources for first-generation college students work?

Literature Review

Without consideration to ethnicity first-generation college[1] students differ from non-first-generation college students in many ways, particularly in terms of age and income. First, first-generation college students tend to be older. About 31% of first-generation college students in 2001 were 24 years of age or older compared to thirteen percent of students (from the same age bracket) whose parents had some college experience and five percent of students with parents who held (at least) a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, first-generation college students tend to come from families with lower incomes. About 42% of first-generation college students come from families in the lowest family income quartile (less than $25,000 annually (or per annum), compared to 22% of students with parents with some college experience and 18% of students with parents possessing (at least) a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

In 2010, a study conducted by the Department of Education indicated that 50% of the college population in the United States was made up of first-generation students (Department of Education, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), minority groups made up the largest demographics of students with parents with no more than a high school education. Of these first-generation college students, 48% were Latino. Additionally, the study found that of all Black or African-American students, 45% were first-generation college students. Furthermore, 32% of the total Asian student population, were first generation and 35% of all Native American Americans are first-generation college students as well. Of students who identify as Caucasian, only 28% were first-generation college students.

In addition, first-generation college students who make it into college are more likely to enroll with less academic preparation, with minimal academic counseling, and limited access to information about college (Thyler, 2000); thus, these first-generation college students are more likely to be placed in vocational, technical or remedial programs in college once they have taken the appropriate placement tests (Chen, 2005; Striplin, 1999). Reflecting their weaker high

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[1] For this paper, first-generation college students are defined as students coming from families where neither parent had more than a high-school education (Pascarella et al., 2004).

school academic preparation, many first-generation college students need remedial assistance after they enrolled in college (Striplin, 1999). These students are arguably the most academically vulnerable (Gándara, 1995). In early 2000, fifty-five percent of first-generation college students took some remedial courses during their college years, compared with 27% of students whose parents held a bachelor's or advanced (professional or graduate) degree (Chen, 2005).

Furthermore, first-generation college students often face obstacles navigating institutions of higher education, while encountering cultural conflicts between previous educational experiences at home and their new college culture (Thyler, 2000; Vargas 2004). Low income, minority, and first-generation students are less likely than their peers to have knowledge about relevant higher education issues, such as financing their education, time management skills, pre-admission procedures, and post-admission requirements (Thyler, 2000; Vargas, 2004).

Higher education research pertaining to first-generation college students points to the vast differences between this population and majority students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 2005; Thyler, 2000). Facilitating a smooth and information rich transition to college for first-generation students is critical for both students and their families. It is during the first year of college that students are most vulnerable to drop out (Ishitani, 2006; Striplin, 1999). Research has not been able to fully document the key factors (sense of belonging, resources, campus climate, faculty interactions, peer support groups, mentorship activities) that could influence behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of students to ensure appropriate retention efforts are made to keep students in school. This is especially important because first-generation students are four times more likely than their counterparts to drop out of school after their first year, and because only forty-six percent of those who enroll in college will graduate with a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Research has been able to document some key factors contributing to the academic well-being of first-generation college students. When students have meaningful relationships with their professors, they are more likely to gain access to valuable information to help them in their transition to college and their eventual retention (Wang, 2014). Providing diversity education courses highlighting students' cultural background improves academic performance, eases the transition to college process, and exposes students to social class achievement gaps (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2013).

Although there is a vast array of literature focusing on adjustment to college in the first year of college, research focused on transitions to college from high school is scant. It is known, however, that integration has been identified as a success strategy for students in that first year of college (Tinto, 1993). In order to achieve success, a student must be socially and academically integrated into the college environment. It is the responsibility of institutions to provide and facilitate an array of venues for students to feel connected to their campus. Furthermore, based on the knowledge that many first-generation students enter college insufficiently prepared, community colleges across the country have focused on how to facilitate the process for students to attain academic success through participation in learning communities (Kozeracki, 2002; Tinto, 2005).

Latino First-Generation College Students

Latino first-generation college students experience higher education differently than their non-Latino peers. The experience differs because Latinos are more than likely the first in their families to attend college and at the same time are from an underrepresented community in higher education. Latino first-generation college students rely heavily on siblings, peers, and relatives when it comes to making their college plans (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Understanding the pivotal role of families on the education of Latino students is key to supporting their transition to college as well as their persistence. Families are an important source of support for students, therefore they should be valued as important educational partners.

Much of what we know about Latino first-generation college students has been through studies that have examined first-generation students or Latino college students. Few studies have specifically focused on the experience of Latino first-generation students in higher education, and we know very little about their transition to college from high school (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smith & Zhang, 2009). However, we do not know much about the experiences of Latino families during this transition. This study adds to the existing literature by providing insight into the parenting practices of Latino first-generation college students to help inform university practices regarding both the recruitment and the retention of this population in higher education.

It is of upmost importance for educators to understand the experiences of Latino first-generation students in higher education in order to be responsive to their needs and provide

services for their persistence. Latino students experience a significant amount of adjustment as they transition into any undergraduate institution (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Students experience a feeling of loneliness and isolation due to the dismal numbers of students of Latino descent in higher education (Corona-Ordonez, 2013; Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). Similarly, Latino students have difficulty navigating the university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Torres, 2006). Latino first-generation college students often report being targets of racism and negative stereotypes (Corona-Ordonez, 2013; Nuñez, 2009). However, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that academic and social involvement on campus can facilitate a sense of belonging, and this in turn counteracts the negative impact of discrimination and prejudice students experience (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009).

In order to persevere, it is important for students to find safe spaces on campus where they can strengthen their on-campus networks and deepen their sense of belonging (Hsiao, 1992; Musoba,Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Nuñez, 2009). Similarly, by maintaining family and community connections, students find the support, encouragement, and strength to make it through their educational trajectory (Early, 2010; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Family has been identified as an important source of support during the transition to higher education for Latino students (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Early (2010) notes that Latino first-generation college students additionally look to the work ethic and determination exhibited by their parents for strength and encouragement.

Despite feeling lonely and isolated, Latino first-generation students feel pride and responsibility with becoming the first in their families to go to college (Boden, 2011; Borrero, 2011), and have a desire to financially assist their families (Boden, 2011). Many Latino first-generation college students display resiliency, and this also aids in their eventual graduation (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009).

Learning Communities

According to the literature, the next step in promoting student engagement and success is through learning communities. Learning communities are comprised of students grouped in a cohort-type model with faculty. Researchers have indicated that faculty interaction plays a significant role in fostering student success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Furthermore, "learning communities involve curricular structures that link together courses to encourage

deeper understanding of course material and more meaningful interactions between students and faculty and among groups of students" (Knight, 2003, p. 6). Learning communities deliberately structure the curriculum so that students are more actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty over a longer period of time than in traditional course settings (Smith & Hunter, 1988). According to Cross (1998), Ryan and Glenn (2004), and Knight (2003), learning communities attempt to create a knowledge-based environment, a space where students can comfortably develop their own intellect and will stimulate learning by inquiry.

In many cases the separation of academic disciplines creates artificial boundaries between subjects that students could better understand as interrelated parts. Integrated instruction promotes the discovery of connections and is a vital skill for all students to have in a changing world as they experience learning communities (Dodge & Kendall, 2004). One of the most effective learning communities restructure the course unit by developing various kinds of interdisciplinary connections or linkages that engage faculty and students in "reconceptualizing social, economic, political, and multicultural issues" (Gabelnick, 1997, p. 40). Therefore, curricular integration refers to course material that is tied together in such a way as to reveal those connections and stimulate students to think creatively and critically about the material (Visher et al., 2010). The friendships formed through co-enrollment may help students stay in school longer (Arbona & Nora, 2007), but learning communities can offer curricular coherence; integrative, high-quality learning; collaborative knowledge-construction; and the skills and knowledge relevant to student lives. The areas mentioned, which are being fostered by learning communities, are the hallmarks of higher education (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008; Visher et al., 2010).

Learning Communities Models

Although a variety of approaches are used to build learning communities, there are four models most commonly found among colleges and universities across the country:

1. Paired or Clustered Courses: In their most basic form, learning communities are a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Paired or clustered-course learning communities link individually taught courses through cohort and often blocked scheduling (scheduling of courses in back-to-back time slots). The paired-course model is considered a basic approach that does

not necessarily involve curricular integration. Offerings tend to be courses-typically in writing or math that traditionally enroll a significant number of first year students. These courses can be interdisciplinary and can promote a classroom environment in which students and faculty get to know each other and have more meaningful interactions (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Tinto, 2005; Van Slyck, 2006).

2. Cohorts in Large Courses: These learning communities work well at large universities where freshmen typically enroll in at least one or two large lecture courses in which the learning communities students represent a subset of the total enrollment. When a large lecture course also requires enrollment in a smaller discussion session, students are typically enrolled in a designated learning community section led by an undergraduate peer teacher (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Van Slyck, 2006).

3. Team-Taught Programs: Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme that links the courses. The point is to ensure that the shared curriculum provides students with a coherent interdisciplinary experience that promotes a deeper type of learning than is possible in stand-alone courses. Themes are created by faculty and are interdisciplinary in nature. Themes can be broad and liberal arts based, emphasize skill development in related disciplines, or prepare students for study or practice in professions. Small group sections are an important part of this type of learning community. Students and a faculty member break off into smaller groups to build upon what is being learned in the other courses in the community and discuss assigned texts (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Tinto, 2005.

Team-taught learning communities are also called coordinated studies programs and enroll varying numbers of students in two or more courses organized around an interdisciplinary theme. This type of learning community represents the most extensive approach in terms of curricular integration and faculty involvement (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Van Slyck, 2006).

4. Residence-Based Programs: Residence-based programs – involves the adaptation of a particular curricular model to include a residential component. The primary goal of residence-based education is the integration of students' living and academic environments. In residence-based learning communities, intentionally organized student cohorts enroll in specific curricular offerings and reside in dedicated living spaces. Residence-based learning communities are designed to integrate diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences. Out of the four models, residence-based learning communities are the most radical because they require changes

across campus: in curriculum, teaching, and housing (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Van Slyck, 2006).

Students Learning Community Experience

In the past decade, many educators have argued that in order for students to value the democratic process and to develop the skills of social responsibility, they must not be immersed in the traditional higher education model of teach-centered classrooms where students learn in isolation from one another, rather than in collaboration with each other in a shared learning process (Astin, 1985; Barr & Tagg, 1995). According to Lardner and Malnarich (2008), teach-centered classrooms are the opposite of the learning community model, which is to foster collaborative learning environments.

Learning communities provide opportunities for students to socialize in an academic context, regardless of their level of academic competence. In addition, living-learning communities encourage socialization beyond the classroom and encourage collaboration among students, faculty, and staff. Institutions have come to understand that student learning occurs best in settings that integrate students' lives and provide social and intellectual support to strengthen the social and intellectual connections between students, which, in turn, help build a sense of community among participants (Cross, 1998; Schroeder & Hurst, 1996; Knight, 2003; Tinto, 2005).

The learning community experience is even more powerful in terms of learning outcomes, particularly when faculty members require students to apply what they are studying in one course to other courses and assignments. Taken together, these features strengthen the social and intellectual connections between students, which, in turn, help build a sense of community among participants (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2005).

In essence, effective learning communities reach out to make contact not only with students in order to establish personal bonds among them, but also between students, faculty, and staff members of the institution (Kuh et al., 2005). Kuh and his colleagues (2005) report that these elements represent the best practices in undergraduate education. Learning communities attempt to create a cohesive culture of collaborative learning at colleges and universities. In addition, the same researchers indicate that establishing learning communities on a campus is an indicator of the institution being student centered at all levels.

According to Laufgraben and Shapiro (2004) and Tinto (2005), most learning communities share several basic characteristics that are described as follows: organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of the curriculum, help students establish academic and social support networks, provide a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college, bring faculty together in more meaningful ways, focus faculty and students on learning outcomes, and provide a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs. Moreover, Lardner (2003) states that it is important that learning communities also become places where faculty develop powerful pedagogical strategies that support learning among all students.

In addition, Tinto (2005) specifies that all learning communities have three things in common: shared knowledge, co-enrollment, and shared responsibility. Shared knowledge requires students to take courses together and organizing those courses around a theme. Furthermore, learning communities seek to construct a shared coherent curricular experience that promotes critical thinking and contextual learning-skills that are increasingly important in an era of information overload. By constructing courses around a theme, it promotes higher levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be obtained through participation in unrelated courses. The second element is co-enrollment. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately, in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. Finally, shared responsibility asks students to become responsible to each other in the process of gaining knowledge. They participate in collaborative groups that require students to be mutually dependent on one another so that the learning of the group does not advance unless all members do their part. A sense of responsible citizenship is often present and purposefully cultivated in learning communities. Students feel a sense of community obligation to complete their assignments, attend class, and share their ideas with one another (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 2005).

Executed well, the interdisciplinary and interactive nature of learning communities introduces students to complex, diverse perspectives, as contrasted with expecting students to come up with the "right" answer, which is characteristic of traditional pedagogical approaches such as the large lecture class. The structure of learning communities also promotes critical thinking and contextual learning-skills that are increasingly important in an era of information overload (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Importance of Learning Communities

Engstrom (2008) and Scrivener (2008) argue that even one semester of learning community intervention can provide an early boost to freshman, helping students move more quickly through developmental requirements and earn more credits in their first semester. In addition, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that the average difference in persistence between learning community and students in 13 community colleges across the country was slightly more than five percent, although on some campuses it was as high as 15%.

Many researchers have found that positive student experiences call for learner-centered environments that promote active and collaborative learning. Learning communities challenge community colleges to rethink traditional classroom structure and implement new models of teaching and learning that engage and partner students and faculty in the academic enterprise. Learning communities are a way to enhance learning outcomes, as well as student success and persistence at community colleges (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004; Tinto, 2005; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008).

In learning communities, students will not only learn about various subjects but also about the relationships between these disciplines and how this content transfers to other learning and life experiences. An inclusive curriculum includes books and issues that reflect the histories and cultures of students who enroll, as well as addressing issues that matter to them (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Lardner, 2003; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). In addition, Visher et al., (2010) note the opportunity of creating connections that will support students as they pursue their academic goals: connections with their fellow students, faculty, and the support services that are available on campus. Connections to students, faculty and support services can lead to a heightened sense of engagement with and belonging on campus, which may in turn lead to stronger academic and personal support, and better academic outcomes. As a result of their engagement, students experience a surge of self-confidence as learners (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

In addition, Rendón (2000) states that community colleges, based on the ideal of democracy, are often viewed as vehicles of access and opportunity. The students served by community colleges often come from "ethnic and racial minorities, and [they] view community colleges as their last chance to realize their hopes and dreams" (Rendón, 2000, p. 1). Due to the

fact that community colleges are attended largely by commuter students, students who have jobs off campus, and student that are only on campus for their scheduled classes, community colleges often face difficulty in creating a sense of community among their students. Nevertheless, learning communities that give students prolonged exposure to their peers and teachers in more than one class tend to build a sense of community that might not have developed under traditional curricular offerings (Rendón, 2000; Tinto, 2005).

According to Tinto (1997), Visher et al., (2010), and Dodge and Kendall (2004), students can develop strong relationships when they take linked classes together as a group, because they see each other and work together regularly inside and outside of the classroom. It is evident according to Tinto (1997), that participation in a collaborative learning group enables students to develop a network of support—in the form of a small supportive community of peers. Additionally, the collaboration that takes place in the groups helps bond students to the broader social communities of the college while also engaging students more fully in the academic life of the campus. Learning communities provide students with the ability to meet their social and academic needs, without having to sacrifice one for the other (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tinto, 2005; Visher et al., 2010).

In addition, the literature shows that strong relationships between students and faculty also occur when faculty work to become more accessible to their students and are aware of any issues that students may be facing, through extra outreach, sitting in on their teaching partner's class, and communicating regularly with their teaching partner(s) about the students in the cohort (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Researchers found that freshman-to-sophomore persistence was positively and significantly related to the total amount of student-faculty non-classroom contact and particularly to frequency of interactions with faculty to discuss intellectual matters. More specifically, researchers found that specific faculty behaviors contributed to student persistence, such as, faculty being supportive of students' needs, being approachable, and returning telephone calls and emails in a timely fashion (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Visher et al., 2010).

Faculty contributed in four interrelated ways to create these safe, engaging learning environments through doing the following: promoting active learning pedagogies; faculty collaboration and the use of integrative curriculum; development of college learning strategies; and student validation (Engstrom, 2008). Similarly, Engstrom (2008) in her study of three

community colleges found that faculty teaching practices created trusting, safe learning environments that promoted student persistence and success. Students in the various learning communities indicated that they learned better in learning community classes—the courses felt different from other stand-alone classes or prior schooling experiences. According to Engstrom (2008) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) they concluded that the conditions for learning did not just happen because students moved from one class to another, they were created through connecting concepts and themes among the linked courses.

Ultimately, students in learning communities are more academically and socially engaged (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2005). Evidence of this was found in a multi-institution, longitudinal study where it employed both quantitative longitudinal surveys and qualitative case studies and interview methods (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). At the same time, students perceived themselves as having experienced significantly more encouragement, support, and intellectual gain than similar students not enrolled in learning communities. The research shows that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty, staff, and other students is one of the strongest predictors not only of student persistence and success, but also of student development (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2005).

Finally, students are connected to resources that are available on campus when support services are integrated into the learning communities. Ultimately, learning communities foster and nourish a variety of skills, including self-motivation and self-regulation in order for students to succeed in community colleges (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Visher et al., 2010).

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the complexities Latino first-generation students and their families face as they are transitioning into higher education. Students and their parents were interviewed to provide a comprehensive view of Latino first-generation college experiences in the school, home, and their communities. The researchers used in-depth, in-person structured interviews. Questions focused on participants' interactions with support services, educational trajectories, overall experience with participation in learning communities, and their transition to college. Additionally, the study focused on the experiences of students in developmental learning communities, how students exhibited their various capitals as modeled by Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model in their learning communities, what

problems they faced, and what difference the learning communities make in maximizing student success.

Parents in this study provided insights into their interactions with higher education institutions as their children were transitioning to higher education. It is specifically focused on their interactions with educational entities as their students prepared for higher education beginning with their experience in high school, the process they underwent to learn about the educational system in the United States, students application process, college acceptances and denials, college choice, and their experiences during the completion of their first year in college.

Participants included ten students and four families. Parents interviewed had students that just culminated their first year in higher education. Participating students were currently enrolled in a Puente developmental learning community in a community college at the time of their participation in this study. These learning communities are linked classes that enroll the students in both classes (English and Human/Career development) for at least one semester and have related assignments.

Sample

This study included ten students who were involved in a Puente community college developmental learning community at the time of the study. The learning community was an Introductory English Writing course linked to a Human/Career Development course as part of the Puente Program. Puente students take two consecutive writing classes, English 102 in the fall semester and English 300 during the spring semester. These accelerated writing classes use a nationally acclaimed teaching methodology and provide supportive and a stimulating environment for Puente students to build confidence in their writing skills through an exploration of the Mexican American/Latino culture.

In addition, Puente students work closely with their Puente counselor to explore career options, develop an academic plan, and identify lifetime goals. Students visit the University of California, California State University and various private campuses, and attend an annual Puente Motivational Transfer Conference. Furthermore, Puente students are introduced to mentors from the business, professional, and academic communities. Mentors share with students their personal, academic, and career experiences, and provide a window into "real-life work

environments." The network of Puente mentors provide many resources for the Puente students, their families, their colleges, and the community.

These learning communities are linked classes that enroll the same students in both classes and have related assignments. Participants for this study included any Latino student enrolled in the Puente learning community mentioned above. In addition, students self-identified through the use of a questionnaire whether they were first-generation and/or Latino students enrolled at American River community college developmental learning communities. Access to the participants was granted by faculty colleagues teaching in developmental learning communities as a convenience sample. Faculty made announcements in their learning community courses asking for volunteers to participate in the study and the researcher also visited the classes to recruit participants. Each participant was given a $10 gift card if they chose to participate in a structured interview with the researcher. Each participant was aware that the interview was voluntary and confidential. Parents were recruited from communities with large Latino populations.

Latino parents, both mothers and fathers, who at the time of this study had a child culminating their first year of college were selected to participate. Parents interviewed were recruited after they participated in a scholarship workshop. At the end of the workshop participants were asked if they were interested in sharing the experiences they had during their children's transition to higher education.

Data Collection

Four families, primarily mothers and fathers, of Latino first-generation college students were interviewed over a period of time. Each family was interviewed three separate times. Interview I focused on familial demographics and background. Interview II focused on the families' educational history and parental practices in high school and during students' applications to college. Interview III focused on parental practices in their children's transition to college as well as their first two years in college. Parents selected what language they felt the most comfortable with and that they wanted the interview to take place in, either Spanish or English. All parents selected to have interviews conducted in Spanish.

The second part of this study focused on in depth face-to-face structured individual interviews with first-generation Latino students enrolled in a community college developmental learning community. In addition, a demographic questionnaire was handed to each participant

prior to the interview in order to gather additional descriptive data about the student's background.

Furthermore, observer notes were made during the course of all interviews and used as a means of collecting data. These notes were predominantly summaries of what was said, details of body language, and attitudes as they shared their experiences. They provided clarification and substance to the interview transcripts.

All interviews were audio recorded, allowing the researchers to take notes and guide the subjects into areas in more depth or to related areas that appeared a priority to the subject. Immediately after each interview, the researchers reviewed the recorded interviews and notes taken during the interview to consider themes emerging from the conversations and what needed to be altered in format or content for the next interview. The researchers kept a reflective journal to focus on learning and adjustments in data gathering and to document methodological choices at the time the interviews were taking place.

Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed all interviews. Transcriptions of interviews were coded for emergent themes using coding for emerging concepts. Clustering these themes and categories was an on-going process, which was repeated by the researchers throughout the data gathering process. Data was reported by recognizing relevant themes to current research on learning communities and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006). Inductive coding techniques were employed, aimed at discovering the codes from within the data itself as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Further, data was analyzed through a grounded theory approach.

Grounded theory is a qualitative method where data collection and analysis inform and shape each other through an emergent iterative process (Charmaz, 2011). This method produces a theory that is developed from the successive analysis of the data. Grounded theory allows researchers to employ a flexible analytic guideline that allows researchers to focus on their data collection and build middle-range theories that inform the next round of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory allows the researcher to go back and forth between analysis and data collection because each informs, shapes, and advances the other. This keeps researchers interacting with their data constantly. This method prompts researchers to interact with participants through the coding and analysis process (Charmaz, 2011). As a form of triangulation,

we involved participants by sharing findings with them to ensure we had captured what they really meant to say (Erickson, 1986, 2006).

Results

Predominant themes lead to the following two results for parents: (1) relationship building through responsive networks, and (2) necessity of entry person and designated staff member.

Relationship Building through Responsive Networks

The difference that emerged by comparing the educational experiences of their children in the American educational system to their experiences in the Mexican educational system, fostered tremendous awareness in the parents in this study regarding the importance of reaching out to other individuals with greater knowledge of the American educational system. Parents wanted their children to succeed in school, but they "lack the knowledge to access the educational resources to support their children" (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, p. 82). Aware of their limited knowledge of higher education compared to what they know about college in Mexico, Mexican parents in this study trust and rely on the information given to them at school through their children and/or via the networks they have formed.

These responsive networks are created after parents have acquired an awareness of the way higher education operates in the United States. In building educational networks, parents purposefully expand their social networks to include individuals who can guide, mentor, and answer questions about attending college for both their children and the family (Auerbach, 2004; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). First, parents in this study expanded their networks to include individuals who they believe are "successful" or individuals they have met who have enrolled in, attended, and graduated from a university in the United States. Families extended their networks to purposefully include other parents and families who are also supporting their children's education, are gearing them to attend college, or already have a child in college.

Families in this study shared feeling alone without adequate support from schools to help their children become college bound. Parents gained an understanding and awareness that there was information that was not reaching them, but that other dominant class families were receiving through their children's interactions with their peers. Participating parents knew their children

were facing discrimination because their school counselors did not believe their children would make it to college. Parents trust that schools will provide the guidance their children need as they have insider knowledge about educational systems in the United States. However, when the time came to look into colleges, families recognized that neither their children, nor they, were receiving the information they needed. Parents expressed the desire to be guided and provided with resources to help them along in their journey. They described this as a joint journey between the student, parents, and other members of the family. Where they all participated in an equally responsible partnership. For families, this was and continued to be a family venture. In an attempt to share information and to gain access to other information sources, after recognizing there was a knowledge gap, parents extended their social networks to include other families whom they perceived as also supporting their children to get to college. In doing so, they were able to share familial resources and information with one another and form an informal support group among families.

Parents deliberately gathered their individual resources to collectively provide students with services they believed schools were not giving their children: for example, after-school tutoring, visits to performing arts centers, attending events in the community, book talks, and exposing young adults to speakers. They did this by pulling their network resources together.

Yo no quería que Elizabeth cayera por el mismo camino que mi hijo mayor Francisco. Usted sabe, Francisco no fue aceptado a la universidad porque él no tenía los suficientes créditos de matemáticas. Yo no iba a permitir que eso le pasara a Elizabeth también. Yo no le puedo ayudar con sus matemáticas. Mi señor no puede ayudarle con sus matemáticas. Yo siempre pongo atención de quien está en sus clases, y me pongo como, como propósito hacerme de amistad con sus mamas. Entonces pues, unas mamas, con las que me sentía más en confianza, nos teníamos confianza. Pues nos juntamos y hablamos de regularización, usted sabe, como las clases de regularización, a las que puede llevar a sus hijos en México. Una mama nos dijo que había un joven en Sonotville que daba clases de regularización y hablaba español. Nos pusimos en comunicación con él y le dijimos que las tres queríamos regularizar a nuestros hijos. Nos dio una buena tarifa. Yo pienso porque le hablamos en español y le dijimos que siempre le llevaríamos comida. Ellos tienen 2 horas de regularización los sábados por la mañana de 9 a 11 am, 3 veces al mes. Nos turnamos manejando y nos repartimos el costo en tres. No podríamos pagar por las clases de otra manera.

I did not want Elizabeth to fall in the same path as my older son Francisco. You know, Francisco was not accepted into college because he did not have enough math credits. I was not going to allow this to happen to Elizabeth too. I can't help her with math, my husband can't help her with math. I always pay attention to who is in her classes and I make it a point to become friends with their moms. So, a few mothers, the ones I felt more comfortable with and I was "*en confianza*" [we trusted each other], well we got together and we talked about tutoring, you know… like the classes de *regularización* [tutoring] that you can take your kids to in Mexico. One mom said she knew a young man in Sonotville who tutors math and speaks Spanish. We contacted him and we told him that the three of us wanted tutoring for our kids. He gave us a good deal. I think because we talked to him in Spanish and we told him we would always bring him food. They get 2 hours of tutoring on Saturday mornings from 9 to 11 am, three times a month. We each take turns driving and we split the cost in three. We could not afford it any other way.

An important resource identified by parents was tutoring sessions outside school hours in subjects that their children were behind in or that they believed were important for college admission. In this preemptive move, the mothers collectively identified a need for their children, understood that the school was not going to provide this for them, and sought out to find an individual who could provide math tutoring for their children. Additionally, they collectively brought their resources together: time, finances, and transportation to have their children benefit from the tutoring services they were able to secure for them. In this case, the Alcazar family wanted their daughter Elizabeth to receive tutoring in a subject they felt they were not able to help her and they had experienced a need through their son Francisco. In doing so, they purposefully connected with other parents to make this service available to her daughter and two other families.

Key Entry Person

Several parents expressed their desire to be involved in their children's education, but did not become involved because they felt unwelcomed. Additionally, when their students were in college, parents were made to feel as if they did not have a right to inquire about their children due to FERPA regulations. There were however, particular individuals at institutions, particularly dorm room staff, who made themselves available to parents while their children were living in the dorms.

For many parents, participation in schools came after either a teacher or an administrator welcomed them and made them feel important and wanted. This "entry person" then served as an institutional broker for the family and became a go-to person for which families relied and needed information from. Often, this entry person was a teacher or counselor at the school who was interested in supporting the child to go onto college.

Parents expressed their gratitude in being able to ask this "key person" about the academics of their children and be able to stay informed of their children's education. This key person not only facilitated parent entry to schools, but also served as a broker for parents as they sought to navigate the complex roadmap leading to a student applying to college.

There are multiple transitions that students undergo as they graduate from high school and begin college. As students experience these transitions, their families do so as well. Their roles as parents change because they are now subjected to complex higher education institutions that limit the participation of parents.

When students live in the dorms, most universities have career staff who communicate with parents. The families in this study had children who lived in the dorms and who had access to a university staff person who was able to vet their questions. "*La encargada de los dormitorios siempre estuvo disponible para nosotros, pero cuando Ana se movio a su apartamento ya no podiamas hablar con ella.*" "The person in charge of the dorms was always available for us, but when Ana moved into her apartment we could no longer contact her."

This support, however, significantly diminished as their children moved out of the dorms. The dorm staff do not speak with parents once their children move out of the dorms, thus marginalizing parents and leaving them isolated as they seek support from university officials when they are trying to resolve an issue. In the transition from the first-year to the second year of college, families are also undergoing a transition. Families go from having a staff member whom they can communicate with, to not having a point person in the university whom they can communicate as needed. Families expressed a need to be able to contact a career staff member that is culturally sensitive and can tend to the needs of families. For the most part, parents had questions regarding tuition payments and services available to meet the needs of their students.

During this time, parents felt isolated from educational systems and had to rely heavily on information from other sources in addition to the information that their college students shared with them. "*Todo lo que sabía era porque Jessica me platicaba. Pero me sentía como padre perdida.*

No sabía cómo apoyarla." "All I knew was because Jessica would tell me. But as a parent, I felt lost. I did not know how to support her."

Preliminary results for student experiences illuminated the challenges that exist for increasing student academic success in the community college context while addressing the role of learning communities. The specific areas they must tackle in order to foster a positive college transition for first-generation students, include: (a) faculty interaction, (b) academic engagement, and (c) social engagement. Colleges and universities that address these three issues during the student's first year, increase opportunities for student success and a positive transition to college.

The following two themes emerged from the learning community students: (1) caring professors and (2) social networks.

Caring professors

Students overwhelmingly shared that they felt that their professors in their learning community were caring and made them feel welcomed and comfortable in the classroom. Furthermore, they described their professors as family members. One student even described one of the learning community professors as an uncle. K.R. shared her experience of the family atmosphere she felt inside and outside of the classroom with the cohort of students from her learning community:

> Well, Puente's like a community, you know? It's a family. Everybody knows each other inside the classroom. Some of us outside the classroom—we have gone to sushi with the classmates.

Social Networks

Students identified family and friends as members of their social network that first informed them of counselors to meet with at the institution and even courses to consider their first semester. Students often first learn about college from their family members and friends. Although characterized as first-generation college students, the students in this study constructed conceptions of learning communities from social and familial networks, and specifically by personal experience or family members who had attempted college. Most students were introduced to the learning community by a community college counselor whom they were referred to by a family member in many cases. Second, a sibling or friend also introduced them

to the learning community and they enjoyed the sense of accountability and family atmosphere they experienced in the learning community. S.S. shared that her sister told her about the Puente learning community, even though she had not taken it herself she knew the counselors that worked with the students enrolled in the learning community:

> My sister told me, "You can take Puente." She wasn't in it. But she definitely collaborated with Manuel (counselor) and Rick (counselor) a lot. Just in general—going to get her ed plan and talking to them. I think she had really close relationships with them—with Rick. I think she was friends with him. I don't know. He would talk to her and I would also talk to him, and he was the second one to say, "You should join Puente." And then, I went to Manuel at the end of that summer semester, I think, and he was like, "You should join Puente." So, I just…I did it. And not only that, but they had the English that was available. And it turns out it was a really good decision. Yeah.

Furthermore, participants found relationships with classmates as an important part of their learning community journey. Within those relationships students found the support they need to complete their academic journey, but also these were the students who also became their friends outside of class. Most importantly, the students they met in their learning community became a part of their supportive social network.

Discussion

In summary, Latino first-generation students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves at institutions that are committed to their success. Additionally, these institutions should hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic and social support, give frequent feedback, and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty, in learning. The key concept is creating an educational and familial community. Institutions need to establish educational communities that academically and socially involve all students as equal members of the institution, but that also involve the family community as a source of support for Latino first-generation students through their transition to college.

The researchers work highlights disconnects between student services aimed at providing resources to first-generation college students. We argue that if services worked together with families we could leverage resources and insure students persist and graduate. We find of utmost

importance to include parents in the conversation and identify their strengths and assets and utilize these to help retain students, and help as they transition into community colleges and/or four-year universities. The goal is to foster parent relationships with the university and provide parents opportunity to become involved with the campus community. This can be done through the development of a parent website and regular bilingual communication through email and newsletters. Ultimately this will enhance the student experience by building the connections with parents.

As expressed by the families, there is a clear need for a dedicated career staff that is culturally sensitive, bilingual, and can tend to the needs of families. For the most part, parents have questions regarding tuition payments, services available to meet the needs of their students, and resources available to students. During this time, parents feel isolated from educational systems and have to rely heavily on information from other sources in addition to the information that their college students share with them.

Conclusion

Parents are a valuable resource that can provide tremendous support to institutions of higher education. In particular, when seeking to retain and graduate Latinos, it is important to enlist the support of parents. We know parents want their children to succeed academically and support their children. Arming parents with information about the college experience their children are about to undergo before they start college can arm parents with the tools and resources to help guide students. This can be accomplished by hosting workshops for the families of incoming students. Thus, helping an allegiance to retain and graduate students. These workshops can then lead to the creation of networks families wish to form. As previously noted, families wanted to create networks with other parents with college attending children, these workshops help facilitate families connecting with other families at the same institution.

The educational system in the United States can be characterized as a system where individuality is valued and rewarded (Bowles, 2014; Hofstede, 2001); where parents are initially seen as important key players during elementary school (Epstein 1992; Epstein 2001). The importance of this role diminishes, as students get older. This sense of "individualism" increases as a student advances through each school grade and continues as they enter higher grades (Bowles, 2014; Shain, 1994). There seems to be a turning point in middle school where parents

are no longer considered key partners in the schooling of children. As the student gets older there is a bigger push to keep parents out of their children's education. This system of operation fails Latino students (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). It is at these critical turning points, when students need the support of their families, and families need the support of schools (Nuñez, 2009). In the United States, families are valued for their participation in schools in K-12 settings. If parents are not present in the classroom during these years, then they are labeled as not caring, not supporting, and not interested in the education of their children. However, if they are then interested in the education of their children when they are in college, they are viewed as "helicopter parents." Helicopter parents (Cutright, 2008; Hoover 2008), are parents who pay close attention to the experiences of their children in educational institutions and as such do not encourage a student to become independent. Parents who deviate from the standard notions and protocols are therefore deemed as not caring for their children.

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