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### Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

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**Mexican and Mexican American Student Reflections on Transfer: Institutional Agents and the Continued Role of the Community College**

**Edén Cortez**

*University of Utah*

**Erin L. Castro**

*University of Utah*

**Abstract**

This qualitative analysis draws upon the experiences of six Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students during the 2012-2013 academic year. Relying on literature regarding institutional agents, we examine students' reflections regarding pre- and post-transfer support from both institutional agents and structured student programs. We provide descriptive information about participation in key student support programs such as CAMP and TRiO SSS, which provided many students with introductions to institutional agents. A combination of programmatic support and guidance from individuals who acted as institutional agents assisted students in this study throughout the transfer process. Overall, individuals employed by the community college played key roles in the lives of Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students pre- and post-transfer.

**Keywords:** community college transfer, Mexican and Mexican American transfer students, student support programs, institutional agents

## Introduction

Issues on persistence, retention, and completion rates for Latinx<sup>1</sup> transfer students in higher education continue to garner the attention of researchers, practitioners, and university leaders. This student population faces tremendous challenges in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Research indicates Latinx students earn fewer baccalaureate degrees than their white peers despite desires to persist (Melguizo, 2009), and vertical transfer (e.g. transfer from a community college to a four-year university) rates continue to lag behind white students (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014). In what Nuñez and Elizondo (2013) refer to as the *Latino/a Transfer Gap*, Latinx community college transfer students remain underrepresented at four-year universities despite their expressed intentions to transfer and complete degrees. The vast majority of Latinx community college students enter with intentions to transfer (Martinez & Fernández, 2004); yet, only about 35% complete a degree or certificate and/or transfer to a four-year university (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014). Critical research shows that Latinx transfer students can face disproportionate bias in the vertical transfer process, preventing full participation in college life and ultimately, completion. Such challenges include—but are not limited to—incidents of racism and systemic racism (Castro & Cortez, 2017; Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014; Reynolds, Sneva, & Beehler, 2010), language discrimination and perceptions of limited English language proficiency (Alexander, Garcia, Gonzalez, Grimes, & O' Brien, 2007), and potential anxiety and fear related to documentation status (Huber & Malagon, 2007; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015).

Yet, despite systemic and institutional challenges, Latinx community college transfer students can and do persist. Like all postsecondary students, Latinx community college transfer students benefit from support, caring, and validation from institutional agents who can further support their educational experiences (Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon, 2013; Rendón, 2002). Dowd et

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<sup>1</sup> Our use of Latinx is an attempt at inclusivity and recognition of the non-binary, trans\*, and fluid nature of gender—as well as the continuous development of language and linguistic choices. We wish to note that the use of x is not a settled debate and draws ongoing discussion in the field of critical ethnic studies, gender studies, and contemporary publics, among other outlets. Our own understandings regarding the use of x continue to evolve. Yet, we feel it important to use the x in this moment to keep attention toward gender, gendering, and more expansive and accurate notions of genders and gender identities. As we stated in previous work, this term refers to “female, male, transgender, gender queer, and gender nonconforming individuals who racially, ethnically, and/or culturally identify as descendants of Latin Americas—including South and Central America as well as colonized and borderized territories of North America” (Castro & Cortez, 2017, p. 1). Unless we are directly citing a primary source, we use Latinx throughout. For more on this evolving discussion and the politics (and tensions) regarding linguistic choices, see: de Onís, C. M. (2017). What's in an 'x': An exchange about the politics of 'Latinx.' *Chiricú Journal: Latino/a Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*, 1(2), 78-91.

al.'s (2013) research documents how transfer agents or transfer champions, individuals who assist Latinx students with understanding and navigating academic and bureaucratic processes related to successful transfer, play a key role in guidance, mentorship, and advocacy. Often times, Latinx community college students come into contact with transfer agents through their participation in structured student support programs at either or both the sending or receiving institution. Participation in select student support programs, such as programming with organized interactions among faculty, academic advisers, and peers, is correlated with increased student success and intentions to persist among Latinx students (Tovar, 2015). Structured support programs can provide direct and consistent access to academic advisors and counselors who are heavily and personally invested in the success of their students. These programs can provide both formal and informal supports, including mentoring, access to resources, and various programming efforts to students who come from low-income backgrounds, are first-generation, are migrant, and/or have disabilities (Mahoney, 1998; Museus, 2010). Indeed, student support programs continue to be a crucial component of postsecondary success among Latinx community college transfer students (Jain, Lucero, Bernal, Herrera, & Solorzano, 2017).

The present study contributes to these scholarly conversations in two important ways. First, drawing from previous qualitative research (Cortez, 2013), this analysis focuses on the experiences of Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students who successfully transferred to a four-year university. Secondly, this study specifically examines students' perceptions and understanding of student support programs accessed through the transfer process. Thus, this study addresses the following research question:

- In what ways do Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students reflect upon their experiences with pre- and post-transfer support?

In sharing their experiences, students elevated both programmatic and individual support in their transfer processes, of which we expand upon and analyze in this study.

### **Literature Review**

Successfully navigating four-year institutions can be challenging for many community college transfer students. Community college transfer students may require additional and different kinds of support given their experiences (Townsend & Wilson, 2006)—this is

particularly true for community college transfer students of Color attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Bensimon & Dowd 2009; Dowd et al., 2013; Museus & Neville, 2012). Museus (2010) and Museus and Neville (2012) point out the importance of institutional agents in providing access to dominant forms of social capital for students of Color to ensure their success at PWIs. For example, among the findings in Museus's (2010) study, he identified the importance of institutional agents in providing students of Color with access to forms of dominant social capital needed to achieve their academic goals, similar to Dowd et al.'s (2013) discussion of transfer agents and transfer champions. In this sense, dominant social capital encompasses the types of benefits accrued by individuals who participate in networks or groups and utilize acquired benefits as sources to gain other benefits (Bourdieu, 1985). In the case of transfer students, they can experience limited or no access to dominant capital which include access to accurate and timely information, connections with knowledgeable and helpful individuals on campus, understanding the availability of and how to utilize campus resources—including scholarship and funding opportunities, among related institutional connections that are crucial to successfully navigate their institution. Support provided by social agents is not a one-time encounter, as Museus (2010) points out, but an on-going relationship or a number of relationships throughout students' educational trajectories at the university. In sum, institutional agents are more than solely academic advisors or counselors in that they work to understand and empathize with students' life situations and show this through demonstrating care and trust. Committed to student success, institutional agents are part of a larger network at the university, and beyond, and they use this network to address students' needs and connect them with others within their networks.

Research on institutional agents serves to elevate the role that institutions play in facilitating and/or limiting student success, and particularly minoritized student success. Turning toward institutional agents also helps to understand how actors within the university interact with and influence students' engagements with and perceptions of higher education. For community college transfer students, making connections with institutional agents can prove challenging during the transfer process (Bensimon, & Dowd, 2009; Fry, 2002). Structured student support programs, including federal, state, and locally funded projects, can facilitate connections among incoming students and individuals at the college and university committed to their success. For Latinx community college transfer students, having access to transfer

agents early in the transfer process is essential for decisions regarding how and where to transfer, as well as having the necessary information and materials to do so (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Dowd et al., 2013). Latinx students often have limited access to necessary information regarding transfer, which contributes to lower transfer and completion rates in general, as well as persistent underrepresentation at selective receiving institutions (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009).

The post-transfer experiences of Latinx transfer students at the receiving institution are also mitigated by access to supportive, caring, and well informed institutional agents (Dowd et al., 2013). In research conducted by Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon's (2013), many of their community college transfer participants had consistent support from institutional agents, including program directors, university administrators, faculty, among others, who had high levels of authority at both the sending and receiving institutions. In their study, institutional agents provided students with mentorship that reassured their academic goals at both institutions, and more so at sending institutions—community colleges. Their participants did not have positive guidance early in their educational trajectories and all shared how crucial their connection to institutional agents was for them to realize their potential and become successful transfer students.

The above research demonstrates that for Latinx community college transfer students, connection with institutional agents can positively aid in realizing educational goals regarding transfer and completion. Yet, we continue to know little regarding how Latinx community college transfer students connect with and perceive institutional agents, as well as where institutional agents are located within the institution. Knowing such information can assist in correcting contemporary disparities in vertical transfer—that is, the Latino Transfer Gap—as it can provide insight into if and how Latinx students connect with institutional actors at the sending and/or receiving institutions.

### **Theoretical Framing: Institutional Agents, Social Capital, and Validation**

In this study we draw on the concept of institutional agents as conceptual framing for the present analysis (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The concept of institutional agents was developed in a secondary education context with high school Mexican youth, and we connect the importance of institutional agents in the validation of transfer students as conceptualized by Rendón (1994). In addition, social capital is linked to the conceptualization of institutional

agents in that students benefit from connecting with and accessing institutional agents' social capital that supports their education endeavours. In this sense, we provide a critique of the deficit thinking that renders minoritized students as having no or low social capital by acknowledging Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of Community Cultural Wealth.

Stanton-Salazar's (2011) study focused on minoritized youth who he argued have "low-capital", meaning, a limited access to and knowledge about crucial resources (p. 1067). Stanton-Salazar (2011) stated that resources and key forms of social support are embedded in students' immediate network and can be accessible through nonfamily adult agents with authority, which he refers to as institutional agents. Like all students, minoritized students are part of a series of socialized processes and, as such, they engage with multiple individuals, groups, networks, and authority figures. Taken together, students are part of a "complex social world" and learning to navigate these networks are crucial for students' effective participation in society and societal institutions like higher education (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067). Because of entrenched structural inequities, students of Color and other minoritized students throughout all levels of education are often excluded from learning about and engaging with dominant forms of social capital in meaningful and fulfilling ways. From this perspective, Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that minoritized youth consequently have limited social capital that can provide them with the necessary tools, support, language, and understanding of enactment of specific social identities that can prove beneficial in educational spaces.

Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth is important to recognize here, given an emphasis on capital as it relates to institutional agents. According to Yosso (2005), minoritized students hold different type of social capital or cultural wealth that helps them navigate dominant environments. Often their cultural wealth goes unnoticed by school representatives who value dominant conceptualization of social capital (i.e., socioeconomic status and parents' education background) over other forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). In this sense, community cultural wealth derives from the rich experiences students have in their community. Thus, Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth critiques dominant understandings of cultural capital by illustrating the types of wealth held by minoritized and marginalized students and communities of Color. The problem is that such wealth often goes unrecognized and/or devalued within PWIs, potentially leading to the development of compensatory programs rooted in deficit perspectives of students of Color

(Castro, 2014). Contrary to employing educational deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010), Yosso (2005) argues that Latinx students can enact six forms of capital, including aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistance. An emphasis on institutional agents as an analytic framework aligns with Yosso's (2005) research in that institutional agents can and should recognize the multiple forms of wealth held on behalf of students and communities of Color (Dowd et al., 2013).

Stanton-Salazar (2011) notes that institutional agents are non-kin individuals who can play empowering roles in the educational experiences of minoritized students. Institutional agents use their high-status positions (i.e., administration, faculty, staff, counselors, etc.) in ways to strategically support students to enable them to effectively navigate their immediate environment. Rendón's (1994, 2006) concept of validation theory is useful in understanding the influence that individuals can have on the educational experiences of Latinx students. Rendón (1994) notes that "validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" for students and mainly Latinx transfer students (p. 44). Rendón (2006) contends that while some students can navigate college campuses and form connections on their own, validation theory asks that college faculty, administrators, and staff take the initiative in reaching out to students to assist them in learning "more about college, believe in themselves as learners, and have a positive college experience" (p. 5). When individuals took the initiative to reach out to students and validate them academically and/or interpersonally, Rendón (1994) found that students began to believe that they could be successful. Indeed, support from institutional agents can help to empower students so that they can understand and learn to counter oppressive systems (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In this sense, institutional agents can play key roles in the socialization and empowerment of minoritized students in higher education.

### **Methodology**

The data used in this analysis are drawn from a larger qualitative study conducted in 2013 that examined the transfer related experiences of Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students in the Pacific Northwest during the 2012-2013 academic year (Cortez, 2013). The primary study used LatCrit (Alemán, 2009) to analyze students' understanding of their pre- and post-transfer experiences, and interview protocol was designed

to elicit both students' experiences with accessing support programs pre- and post-transfer and their racialized experiences as a community college transfer student of Color. This current study draws from data collected from two main interview constructs: a) student access to support programs during the transfer process; and b) formal and informal support received from institutional agents at both the sending and/or receiving institution.

## Participants

A total of six Mexican or Mexican American students, three who identified as women and three who identified as men, participated in this study between 2012 and 2013 (See Table I; pseudonyms used). All participants transferred from the same two-year institution to the same four-year university and identified as either Mexican or Mexican American. Five of the students were the first in their families to attend college and earn a high school diploma, with the remaining student earning a General Educational Development diploma. Academic major at the receiving institution is included in Table I for further context.

Table I

*Participant Demographic Information*

Name	Age	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	College Generation Status	Secondary Credential	Major
Laura	21	Female	Mexican American	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	High School Diploma	Animal Science
Blanca	22	Female	Mexican	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	High School Diploma	General Science
Jorge	21	Male	Mexican	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	High School Diploma	Computer Science
Alex	35	Male	Mexican American	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	GED	Ethnic Studies
Ruby	21	Female	Mexican	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	High School Diploma	Geography
Saul	29	Male	Mexican American	Father college graduate	High School Diploma	Ethnic Studies

Potential participants were recruited via email solicitation. Emails were sent to Latinx student organizations, advisors from academic colleges on campus, and student support programs aimed at serving first-generation and low-income students at the receiving institution. Snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009) was used to recruit additional eligible students. Eligibility was based on two inclusion criteria; first, students needed to self-identify as Mexican and/or Mexican American and, second, potential participants must have attended at least one academic year at the community college prior to transfer *and* completed at least one academic year at the receiving institution.

### **Limitations**

Due to the previous study design, there are two important limitations to address in this analysis. First, only one author conducted interviews; thus, data interpretation may have been enhanced with the presence of both authors during interviews and peer-debriefing sessions. Second, the original study was designed to elicit the experiences that students had with both institutional agents and structured student support programs. However, the protocol was not designed to probe further into the meaning-making students had with individuals and programs. Our current analysis could have been enhanced by asking additional questions regarding students' perceptions of support programs and institutional agents. Future research may want to examine the perceived long impact of these programs and institutional agents on behalf of participants.

### **Analysis: Student Support Throughout Transfer and Transition Processes**

The lived experiences of students in this study were heavily influenced by the institutional and informal support they received throughout the transfer processes. The following section is divided into two parts: student participation in support programs and the role of institutional agents in students' educational trajectories. Discussion and implications follow, with concluding recommendations for policy, research, and practice.

## Participation in Support Programs Pre- and Post-Transfer

Five of the six students in this study participated in institutionally supported programs that assisted undergraduate students with academic and social integration of college life. Two of three programs, the College Assistant Migrant Program (CAMP) and TRiO Student Support Services (SSS), were utilized by students at the community college. Students utilized the third program, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), at the university. The only student not to use any formal academic support program was Saul and this was likely due to a combination of factors, including his age, his formerly incarcerated status, and his personal relationship with a graduate student who assisted him in navigating the admissions and transfer process at the receiving institution.

The institutional support that students obtained dramatically differed between sending and receiving institutions, as illustrated in Table 2. Laura, Blanca, Jorge, and Ruby all participated in CAMP at the community college. CAMP is a federally funded program that aims to support migrant or seasonal farmworkers and their children during their first year of higher education. CAMP participants must meet migrant or seasonal farmworker criteria and apply to the program. Support offered through CAMP includes academic counseling, tutoring, financial stipends, and health services, among other related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). Because CAMP is a federally funded government program, only U.S. citizens are able to participate in the program.

Table 2

*Participants' Access to Support Programs Pre- and Post-Transfer*

Name	Community College		University		
	CAMP	TRiO	CAMP	TRiO SSS	EOP
Laura	X	X			X
Blanca	X				X
Jorge	X				
Alex		X			X
Ruby	X				X
Saul					

Two students, Laura and Alex, utilized TRiO SSS while enrolled at the community college. Like CAMP, TRiO SSS is a federally funded program designed to academically support first-generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities while enrolled in

postsecondary education. TRiO SSS participants must meet the aforementioned criteria, apply, and participate in a screening process. TRiO SSS is focused on academically supporting students through degree completion (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Like CAMP, only U.S. citizens are eligible to participate in the program.

EOP programs vary in shape and size across the country and depending on the institution, non-U.S. citizens may be eligible. In general, EOP seeks to support low-income, first-generation, and students of Color at four-year institutions. Services vary depending on institutional commitment, but in general, EOP aims to provide students with academic and financial advice, study skills, and scholarships to ensure their success in college (Berkley, n.d.).

Once enrolled at the receiving institution, students in our study did not continue to participate in TRiO SSS or CAMP. Because CAMP is a first-year program, the students in this sample exhausted their eligibility at the community college prior to transfer and so their lack of formal involvement with CAMP at the university made sense. However, all of the students in this sample were eligible for services through TRiO SSS at the receiving institution but did not apply nor participate. Our research did not examine the reasons why students chose not to apply for TRiO SSS at the receiving institution, but we speculate that limits on program capacity, such as the number of students allowed to enroll and the number of support staff available, influence transfer students' ability to participate in these programs. Institutional programming, staff, and culture among receiving institutions vary, as do services between different institutional types, which can also influence students' ability and desire to participate in support programming.

Three of the five students who received formal services at the community college during their first-year post-transfer enrolled in EOP at the university: Blanca, Alex, and Ruby. Laura also participated in EOP but did not enroll until her second-year post-transfer. When asked to describe the kind of support that students received at the university, the four students referenced formal involvement with EOP at the university. However, all participants, including those receiving services from EOP, mentioned their continued connections with CAMP at the community college. With the exception of Saul, all of the students in this sample participated in institutionally-sponsored support programs geared toward serving underrepresented and underserved students, with the overwhelming majority of that support coming from the community college.

### Institutional Agents: The Continued Role of the Sending Institution

When asked to describe the kinds of support that students received during the transfer process, all students referred to at least one individual who played a key role in their decision to and ability to transfer. With the exception of two students, the *sending* institution employed all individuals who supported students in their transfer process, and who we identify as acting as institutional agents (see Table 3). This finding is perhaps a bit surprising, and unfortunately, wholly insufficient. While Dowd et al.'s (2013) research found that community college transfer students had individuals who acted as transfer agents at both the sending and receiving institutions, only two of the students in this sample identified someone at the university who was integral to their transfer success.

Table 3

#### *Institutional Agents Pre- and Post-Transfer\**

Name	At the Community College	At the University
Laura	Director of Student Services	
Blanca	CAMP Counselor	
Jorge	CAMP Counselor	CAMP Counselor
Alex	TRiO SSS advisor	Academic Counselor
Ruby		Academic Advisor
Saul	Faculty Member	

\*Table design borrowed from Dowd et al. (2013). The role of institutional agents in promoting transfer access. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21(15), 1-38.

Three students mentioned an advisor as important to their ability to successfully understand the university setting. For one student, Ruby, it was an academic advisor at the university who assisted her in navigation. In describing the role of her academic advisor, she focused on the influence the academic advisor had on her ability to be successful at the university. She described that she initially met the woman through a CAMP welcome event and said:

I met a lady, she is an academic advisor from bio research. Really random, I just happened to meet her [at a CAMP event] and she has been more than an academic advisor. She has taken me to the university that I want to go to for

grad school. She got me into a club. She's helping me with my purpose of statement, with scholarships, with applications, like everything and, I mean, I'm not even from her department. I just happened to meet her and like within 20 minutes, probably, I introduced myself, and she said "sure come to my office and the we can talk" and then she brought me papers from different schools... you should apply here, there, over there, and here.

Ruby met the woman whom she refers to as an "academic advisor" through her participation in CAMP at the community college. It is important to point out that this person is not Ruby's official academic advisor but rather an advisor from a different department who is taking on a supportive and mentoring role for Ruby. In further describing their relationship, Ruby refers to this academic advisor as an "angel" who has reached out to help her:

In the way, she appeared into my life, it's kind of like an angel because it was random like nothing. And then now, she takes the time, I mean, to the point that she helps me like even say the words that I need to say, the words that I need to write.

It is clear that Ruby's self-described academic advisor is taking on a mentorship role outside of her required responsibilities and these kinds of activities align with the aims and actions of institutional agents. The fact that Ruby is not in the same department as her academic advisor is striking, particularly given the workload and responsibilities academic advisors have to their home departments. It is also worth asking if and to what extent Ruby's experiences might be different if she were being mentored from someone in her academic discipline.

Blanca's experience with a financial aid advisor who assisted in her transfer is similar to Ruby's. Blanca described a Latina financial aid advisor from CAMP that guided her during her transition to the receiving institution. The advisor not only helped her apply to the receiving institution, but also introduced her to EOP and visited her after enrolling in the receiving institution. Blanca explains:

The financial advisor (from CAMP) came to [name of receiving institution]. She did help me with the process of applying and making sure everything was right. But she came a couple of times after I transferred just to make sure I was ok.

She was the one that introduced me to EOP and some resources at [name of receiving institution].

The support from this institutional agent extended beyond the community college, and her basic job obligations associated with being a financial aid counselor at the community college. Because of the support provided by this advisor, Blanca was able to access additional resources such as EOP and the Academic Student Center that helped her balance school work.

Alex also identified an academic advisor at the university in addition to an academic counselor at the community college as pivotal in his ability to transfer and persist. Alex held reservations about his ability to access and be successful in higher education. When asked if there was someone who helped him during the transfer process, he first mentioned his TRiO SSS advisor at the community college:

Oh yeah, my [TRiO SSS] advisor. She helped me the most. She was always there and making appointments with me. I mean, she would actually leave the [campus tour] group to go to my appointments at the university because she was a little more savvy, I guess. She would walk with me to all my appointments, sit down, and ask questions. I felt like she knew more of the questions than I knew, and so she knew me better than I knew myself, or the questions I should have asked.

In expanding, Alex elaborates on what he sees as one of the major components of support that he received from his TRiO SSS advisor while enrolled at the university, which is caring:

The first few terms that I went there [university], I passed my first term and then the second and third term, I failed. She actually wrote me a letter, you know, because I was having personal problems. She really connected with me. She really showed me that she cared, and then I go into another class and found more people that cared... And having that type of support is what gave me the strength to keep going; hey keep trying, keep trying, there are people here that like you, there are people here trying to help you out, so try not to let them down.

Alex's TRiO SSS advisor at the community college played an essential role in his ability to persist at the receiving institution, in large part because of what he describes as caring and motivation. When Alex was placed on academic probation, his TRiO SSS advisor supported his appeal by being his advocate and, as he emphasized, by being someone in his life who cares. Her caring guidance allowed for him to identify other individuals at the receiving institution who cared for him, one person being his academic counselor.

The support received by students in the form of individuals who act as institutional agents is rooted in the community college. For Saul, a 29-year-old high school graduate who was also formerly incarcerated, a faculty member was critical in his decision to transfer to the university as well as his growing ethno-racial identity development. In describing the significant factors related to his decision to transfer, Saul explained how one faculty member inspired an awakening in him to a larger racialized political consciousness—which assisted in his desires and abilities to persist:

It wasn't until, I think it was maybe halfway towards my sophomore year when I took Chicano studies with [Faculty Member] when I really had an awaking. For once, I was kind of wow, you know, ethnic studies is something I found interesting and [Faculty Member] is somebody who challenged me. He made me think critically ... and more so [he] acknowledged me as a scholar. He would even call me Dr. [last name], you know. And for somebody to believe that, I know it was kind of like, it wasn't that I was a doctor but it was something to help me visualize by me hearing it, to actually start thinking—wow being a doctor is actually a possibility.

The kind of role that this faculty member played in Saul's life might be broadly described as inspirational or motivational. For Saul, his Chicano Studies faculty member acted as an institutional agent who empowered him by helping him to overcome learned stereotypes and negative perceptions of himself, expanding his vision of what is possible.

In describing individuals relevant in his transfer experience, Jorge's spoke of a CAMP adviser at the community college who guided him in fulfilling his transfer requirements. This advisor also connected him to CAMP at the receiving institution where he met CAMP advisors who supported him after transferring. Jorge explains:

There were a lot of people helping me out. I got into contact with the CAMP office from here [receiving institution] and they [academic advisors] were the ones actually trying to help me get everything I needed, such as my email set up and all that stuff. They also took time to advise me a little bit... Like how to go through the [name of receiving institution] registration system, and where to find what classes I needed to take in order to be in good standing.

The only participant that did not express having a key institutional agent supporting her post-transfer was Laura. However, she acknowledged that her TRIO advisor at the community college provided her with consistent support throughout the transfer process. After transferring to the receiving institution, Laura saw herself as academically positioned well and therefore she did not need extra support during her first year at the receiving institution. However, Laura did access EOP during her second-year post-transfer.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Overall, individuals employed by the community college played key roles in the lives of Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students pre- and post-transfer. Without his advisor at the community college, it is likely that Alex would have faced challenges in identifying someone who was familiar with the university appeal process and who could have written him a strong letter of support. Ruby's reference to the faculty member as an "angel" is striking as she describes meeting the advisor as a chance encounter and her description indicates that she feels quite grateful for this person. Without her advisor's help, Blanca may have experienced challenges finding and accessing support programs and similarly, Jorge might have taken longer to adjust to the receiving institution's bureaucratic structures if he did not have access to CAMP advisors who helped facilitate his orientation to the bureaucracy of the university. Saul's discussion of the Chicano Studies faculty member speaks to the importance of encouragement and empowerment on behalf of institutional agents. A key aspect of institutional agents is their commitment to empowerment (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) and this stems, not from a savior mentality, but from an understanding of the ways minoritized students are positioned in disadvantageous ways within educational institutions (Valencia, 2010). Saul received what Rendón (1994) might refer to as validation from his relationship with the Chicano Studies

faculty member and it made a lasting difference in his ability to imagine himself pursuing a Ph.D. Institutional agents who are committed to empowerment are critically important for Latinx students who are socialized in a society structured by institutional racism. As a consequence, students of Color are at-risk of internalizing dominant ideas and assumptions about their potential, ability, and worth and students must be provided structured spaces to unlearn these falsehoods.

The kinds of support and guidance identified in this analysis are not easily categorized as they cover a spectrum of personal, socio-emotional, and procedural support. Many of the individuals who act as institutional agents share a Latinx ethno-racial identity with the students, which is important. As members of a marginalized population, students understood these individuals as not simply people who “cared,” but as people who provided access and navigational guidance to institutional structures and bureaucracies. However, it is also necessary to recognize that while representation is important, it should not be the burden of people of Color to solely serve as institutional agents. All faculty, staff, administrators, and institutional leaders need to build capacities for becoming transfer champions (Dowd et al., 2013) for community college transfer students of Color.

While the students in this study benefitted from a combination of programmatic support and individuals who acted as institutional agents in assisting them throughout the transfer process, it is clear that the majority of support is coming from the community college. Several of our participants noted that their previous academic advisor, employed by the structured student support program at the community college, continued to provide crucial support post-transfer. There are a couple dominant ways to interpret this disparity, one being a lack of support at the receiving institution. Indeed, it may be inferred that our participants did not have access to similar institutional agents at the receiving institution, therefore indicating that the receiving institution was not adequately supporting students (e.g., Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solorzano, 2011). However, our data cannot specifically speak to this interpretation as the original study was not designed to address the reasons why students may not have connected with an institutional agent at the receiving institution. Future research may want to explore if and when Mexican and Mexican American community college transfer students connect with institutional agents during post-transfer and the mechanisms they use to do so.

Another way to interpret the difference in institutional agents between the sending and receiving institution is related to institutional mission. Relationships are important and simply because institutional agents are at the community college—individuals who have shown strong commitments to supporting students post-transfer, is not a negative thing. Rather, we see the continuity and continued development of these relationships as positive. It could be inferred that institutional agents from the community college are fulfilling the mission of the community college, working with students throughout the entire transfer process. Thus, it makes sense that we would find more institutional agents associated with the community college than with the receiving institution. The disparity may not necessarily be negative in this regard, but given that two-year schools generally have less funding and resources, it would behoove receiving institutions to better understand these relationships and their responsibility in ensuring pathways to completion for Latinx students. Future research should examine the continued role of institutional agents at the community college in the educational trajectories of Latinx students post-transfer and document the specific ways such agents do their work, how they understand the scope of their work—and, importantly, the kinds of formalized connections they have with (if any) the receiving institution.

### **Conclusion**

As four-year institutions continue to develop support programs for transfer students, it is important for student and academic affairs professionals to create formalized spaces where Latinx transfer students have access to institutional agents. It is also equally important to ensure that Latinx students develop relationships with faculty members early in the transfer process to ensure they have access to the information needed to successfully navigate the receiving institutions' academic and social environments. In addition, four-year universities need to understand the relationships community college transfer students have with institutional agents at sending institutions as well as collaborate with these schools to better support Latinx student transfer. Future research would be wise to further explore these relationships, both from the perspectives of students and agents—as well as from organizational viewpoints.

Mexican and Mexican American students in this study underscore the importance of student support services at both sending and receiving institutions, and point to the need for both sets of services to work in coordination with one another. For the students in this study,

it is important to note that they continued to rely upon support structures at the sending institution throughout their enrollment at the receiving institution, pointing to an opportunity for institutional collaboration. It is also equally important to note that the majority of students in this study were able to have access to institutional agents through their involvement in student support programs. The absence of these services can make it challenging to access the social capital needed to transfer and navigate the receiving institution.

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