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## THE ROLE OF RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FACILITATING LATINO/A COLLEGE SUCCESS

Patricia Sánchez-Connally  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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**THE ROLE OF RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FACILITATING  
LATINO/A COLLEGE SUCCESS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

PATRICIA SÁNCHEZ-CONNALLY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

Sociology

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A Dissertation Presented

By

PATRICIA SÁNCHEZ-CONNALLY

Approved as to style and content by:

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Enobong (Anna) Hannah Branch, Chair

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Joya Misra, Member

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Melissa Wooten, Member

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Kimberly Truong, Member

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Michelle Budig, Department Head  
Sociology

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my brother Erick and to my abue Leticia Sánchez. Even though you are no longer with me, your unconditional love, kelem, q'etq'et, loyalty and sense of humor continue to give me the strength and resilience to get through all obstacles. I carry you in my heart.

This dissertation is also dedicated to all my family both in the U.S. and in El Salvador. Our sacrifice made this possible. To my son Jayden, my god daughter Bella Lucas, my husband Jean and my mother Patricia Hernández.

Dedico este trabajo, principalmente, a mi hermano Erick y a mi abue Leticia Sánchez, quienes a pesar de no estar conmigo, su amor, kelem, q'etq'et, lealtad y sentido del humor continúan dándome fuerzas para alcanzar todas mis metas superando cualquier obstáculo. Mi corazón esta lleno de su luz.

Esta tesis también es dedicada a toda mi familia en Estados Unidos y El Salvador, el sacrificio de todos hizo esto posible. A mi hijo, Jayden, mi ahijada Bella Lucas, a mi esposo, Jean, y mi mami Patricia Hernández.

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“Though we tremble before uncertain futures  
may we meet illness, death and adversity with strength  
may we dance in the face of our fears.”

— Gloria E. Anzaldúa



**ABSTRACT**  
**THE ROLE OF RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FACILITATING**  
**LATINO/A COLLEGE SUCCESS**

MAY 2017

PATRICIA SÁNCHEZ -CONNALLY, B.A., FRAMINGHAM STATE UNIVERSITY

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS-BOSTON

PH.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS-AMHERST

Directed by: Enobong (Anna) Hanna Branch

This dissertation examines the relationship between race and educational achievement among inner city, low income, first generation, and high achieving Latino/a students. Research on students of color has focused on *cultural deficit models*, which portray students as culturally deprived and proposes cultural assimilation as the solution (Nieto 2010; Delpit 2006; Solórzano & Yosso 2002). As a way to contest these models, I describe the role of Academic Support & College Readiness Program (ASP) as a place where *community cultural wealth* (Yosso 2005) is being created and transferred. Community cultural wealth is an alternative concept that uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to challenge interpretations of traditional cultural capital theories. It is defined as knowledge, skills and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to resist different forms of oppression (Yosso 2005; Solórzano & Yosso 2002).

While many studies focus on evaluating academic support programs, this study focuses exclusively on students' experiences and the role of ASP in facilitating their success. I conducted participant observation and forty-seven interviews with students

who reside in La Esperanza, a city about forty minutes north of Boston. I explore how they interpret their roles as children of immigrants, high school students, college students, siblings, role models and risk takers. My results highlight the need for scholars and educators to move away from negative discourse regarding students of color and learn more about how communities of color create cultural wealth to resist different forms of oppression.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, Latinos<sup>1</sup> make up 16% of the total U.S. population making them the largest and fastest growing minority group in the nation (Fry 2011). Not surprisingly, Latinos represent the fastest-growing student population in the U.S. public schools. However, Latinos hold the highest drop-out rates in the country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the drop-out rate among Latinos in 2009 was 17.6 percent, compared to 9.3 percent of African Americans and 5.2 percent for whites (Snyder and Dillow 2011). Educational attainment is an indicator of upward mobility, providing better labor market opportunities, institutional access and economic well-being over a person's lifetime (Charles 2007). Higher levels of high school graduation, persistence through college and earning a bachelor's degree are key milestones which greatly influence future labor market outcomes (Kao and Thompson 2003). Therefore, attending and graduating college is beneficial not only for the individual but also for the minority group in which they belong. Nevertheless, educational inequality persists and even increases at the post-secondary level and gaps in college attendance have continuously increased for over two decades (Charles et al 2007).

Overall, the number of Latinos getting a bachelor's degree is still very low compared to their white counterparts. Using information from the U.S. census, Fry (2011) concluded that only 13% of Latino adults between 25-29 years old had earned a

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<sup>1</sup> Although Latino/a is used throughout this work, I acknowledge the importance of recognizing trans and gender nonconforming individuals who identify as Latinx.

bachelor's degree compared to 19% of non-Hispanic Blacks, and 39% of white Americans in the same age group. A lack of resources and support in highly segregated schools lead to low academic achievement and play a role in perpetuating this problem. Other important factors which contribute to high drop-out rates and low college enrollment include the lack of legal documentation among some Latino populations and subsequent reduced economic opportunities for their families which often lead to high levels of poverty. Among students, even those with legal status who are not U.S. citizens are excluded from some scholarship, financial support and employment opportunities.

In Massachusetts, the concentration of Latinos in the lowest levels of educational attainment has been a persistent pattern. Latino students had the lowest high school graduation rate in 2006 at 56% compared to white students at 85% (Lavan and Uriarte 2008). Overall, about 15.5% of all Latinos in Massachusetts have completed a bachelor's degree or beyond, compared to 37.4% of the general population (Shea and Jones 2006). It is no surprise, with statistics like the above, that scholars have strongly focused on low academic achievement and other issues affecting Latino/a students such as segregated schools, lack of bilingual education and tracking. At the federal and state levels, policy makers have paid attention to the "crisis of Hispanic education" (Fernandez 2002).

Historically, race and racism have shaped academic opportunities for students of color in many different ways. Racism is often embedded in explanations of educational inequality by supporting dominant discourse which does not take into account the experiences of students of color. Two examples of these explanations are the biological and cultural deficit models. Biological models assume that students of color do not have the traits to succeed in school (Valencia & Solórzano 1997). Within the past twenty

years, researchers have relied on this model to explain disparities in college attendance exams like the SAT's and ACT's.

Recently, research on students of color has focused on *cultural deficit models* which portray students as culturally deprived and proposes cultural assimilation as the solution (Nieto 2010; Delpit 2006; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Many teacher education programs would argue that in order for students of color to succeed they should assimilate to the dominant White middle-class culture, by learning English and losing their native language and by cutting family and community ties (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). In addition to these methods of assimilation, future teachers are also exposed to descriptions of failure such as, “disadvantaged”, “at-risk”, “learning disabled” and “the underclass” rather than positive models of success among students of color (Delpit 2006).

For college students, traditional persistence and retention theories highlight the student's ability to separate from his/her previous identity and become integrated in a new academic identity, which is mostly white (Tinto 1986). Scholars have called for research that looks at Latino/a student persistence, specifically the role of family and cultural values and traditions (Barajas and Pierce 2001). There's a lack of discussion regarding the capital, which plays a role in persistence, that students bring to their respective college campuses.

Conducting participant observations and interviews with students who reside in La Esperanza<sup>2</sup>, a city about forty minutes north of Boston, allowed me to understand that as scholars and educators we need to move away from negative discourse regarding students of color and learn more about how communities of color create cultural wealth.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used for city, group, staff and participants' names.



It is important to understand the specific obstacles faced by students of color and to equally emphasize motivators in order to develop mechanisms within the high school and college setting to help students stay in school and ultimately graduate.

Some previous scholarship discusses the role of academic support programs for first generation and low-income students. However, little is known about how these programs expose students of color to different strategies that help to empower them in their transition from high school to college (Villalpando and Solórzano 2004). Despite the odds, the students in this study are all part of an academic support program which promotes post-secondary education, goal setting, career exploration and community involvement. This program serves as a mechanism for students to be exposed to different resistance strategies which they rely on to shape their academic goals and future plans. In an effort to better understand the social processes experienced by Latino students in public spaces such as community organizations, I conducted field work during the summers of 2010 to 2012 at Academic Support and College Readiness Program (ASP) which works primarily with first generation soon to be high school graduates from around La Esperanza. This study describes the ways in which this program benefits an economically deprived community. In order to understand the impact that this program has on its students, it's essential to learn more about the community and the program's background.

### **Background on Academic Support and College Readiness Program**

La Esperanza is a medium size city located about forty minutes north of Boston, Massachusetts. It is the poorest and most densely populated city in the commonwealth with about 76,500 residents. Nearly 70% of the residents identified as Latino, with the

majority being foreign born. La Esperanza has the lowest per capita income (\$18,305) in the state, where the average reported per capita income is about \$33,203 (US Census 2010). Unemployment is twice the state average at 15.1%, and only around 14% of adults have a college degree or beyond compared to 53% statewide (See Table 1 below). In La Esperanza, 87.1% of students in the school system are considered low income and more than half of the high school students do not meet the minimum state standardized test requirements (MCAS). Over 90% of students identified as Latino/a, with the majority being Dominican and Puerto Rican (Massachusetts Department of Education 2016).

**Table 1. Educational Attainment of La Esperanza Adults (US Census 2010)**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> grade	8,186	18.0
9 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> grade, no diploma	6,140	13.5
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	12,689	27.9
Some college, no degree	8,778	19.3
Associate degree	3,229	7.1
Bachelor's degree	3,775	8.3
Graduate or professional degree	2,638	5.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>35,793</b>	<b>85.8</b>

At the high school level, 26.6% of students drop-out within four years and only about 47% graduate within four years. With 77% of students reporting that English is their second language, the risk of low academic achievement, high drop-out rate and limited English proficiency makes La Esperanza a city in crisis to many (Massachusetts Department of Education and Secondary Education 2016). As a level 5 school district, which is considered chronically underperforming, La Esperanza school system was placed in state receivership in 2012.

The Academic Success & College Readiness Program (ASP) is one of many federally funded programs in the Greater Boston area. It was initiated in 1989 and since then, has applied and been awarded five federal grants, each lasting four years. It mainly operates under six objectives including: academic performance in grade point averages and standardized testing, high school retention and graduation, post-secondary enrollment and graduation (Program Grant Proposal 2012).

Their goal is to meet these objectives by offering students an individualized academic plan. During the school year, the student along with teachers, parents, guidance counselors and ASP staff work together to carry out this plan. Program participants are expected to attend ASP four hours a week, including two hours of tutoring and one hour of test preparation (such as MCAS or SATs) and a minimum of eighteen academic counseling sessions. Participants are given a stipend of forty dollars a week and \$180 for the completion of the summer program. Students can also participate in community service, mentoring programs and college readiness activities such as college visits and college fairs.

All students in the program must show that they are low income or/and first generation students between thirteen and nineteen years of age. In addition, students must show high level of motivation, a positive attitude, and desire to seek post-secondary education. Overall, the program has served around 300 high school students in the community since 1999 and has an 80% retention rate. Around 99% of the program graduates earn their high school diploma. During the last 10-year period the program has had a 95% college matriculation rate for program graduates.

During the summer, ASP participants are expected to be part of a six week academic support program which is held on a University campus. Students move into the residence halls, eat in the university cafeteria, and are expected to adhere by University rules and regulations. It is expected that students participate in over one hundred hours of formal instruction in mathematics, literature and composition, foreign language, science and English as a Second Language instruction (if needed). There are also weekly workshops that cover different topics such as goal setting, college planning, public speaking, social etiquette, time management and leadership.

There are two physical spaces for ASP, one (mainly used during the school year) located in the community they directly serve and the second (ASP2) at the University where the majority of my observations took place. During my fieldwork, the first site (ASP1) was located in the bottom floor of a local community college in La Esperanza but was later moved to the high school. The second site, ASP2, is located in a predominantly white city at a four year public university about 15 miles north of Boston. ASP2 uses University facilities such as office space in the student center, classrooms, two floors in a newly built residence hall and the cafeteria.

Using Critical Race Theory to shape my research questions and analyze my data, I show that ASP is an example of how a community of color can develop mechanisms to promote different types of capital among young people. Critical Race Theory challenges conventional understandings of the role of race, racism and cultural capital in educational research. In the field of education, Solórzano (1998) identified five principles of CRT that should inform research: the intercentricity of race and racism; the challenge to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential

knowledge and the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches. Specifically, CRT in education provides perspectives and methods that seek to “identify, analyze, and transform...cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). One of the ways in which this is done is by acknowledging the assets that students of color acquire through their families and communities. Although these assets are often unrecognized and devalued by mainstream society, in some instances they can be helpful in empowering students. CRT scholars suggest that as researchers we must recognize and place the lives of students of color at the center of our research in order for their voices to not be silenced by predominant discourse. Using the community cultural wealth model, which consists of different forms of acquired capital, I consider the following guiding questions: How are familial, navigational, aspirational, social, and resistant forms of capital encouraged in a community setting? How do students interpret the importance of each? What are the implications of this and how does it work?

### **Objectives**

Residents of poor neighborhoods tend to be isolated from social networks and institutions that provide resources for social mobility (Wodtke, Harding & Elwert 2011). In this particular case, students have restricted access to college preparation courses, relationships with school teachers/staff who may serve as mentors and role models (social capital), among other academic opportunities. However, this is not the case for a small group of high achieving Latino students who belong to ASP. The objectives for this study are the following:

- To use students’ narratives as the main source of knowledge

- To empower young people as students of color whose experiences are heard and validated
- To discuss how different forms of capital can be created, learned, transferred and utilized to achieve upward mobility through educational attainment.
- To describe the role of an academic support program as a community mechanism where these forms of capital are being taught and fostered.
- To show that communities of color have ways of transferring cultural wealth, that although not valued by mainstream, can be critical in shaping students' educational pathways.

### **Research Questions**

1. What role does ASP play in shaping students' outlooks towards higher education? How does the program provide students the opportunity to learn to rely on each other for motivation? How does the program train students to transform negative interactions into motivators?
2. To what extent do the experiences of ASP students' parents motivate students to succeed? How do students interpret and use those experiences to set career goals? How do parents verbalize family expectations? Does that process vary by gender?
3. How important and useful are the different types of capital in navigating the college environment? How are students able to deal with new set of challenges away from home and ASP? What support systems did they find in college? Did they use any skills learned in ASP while in college? If so, how?

My first paper, *“I Am Because We Are”*: *ASP as a Social and Academic Counterspace* focuses briefly on the challenges that Latino students face and how these are being countered by a number of different forms of support and resistance strategies. Using interviews with high school students, findings show that the program teaches students how to rely on each other for peer support and most importantly the meaning of “proving people wrong” as a way to resist discrimination and negative interactions with school staff and teachers.

The second paper *Higher Education Attainment as a Family Sacrifice* discusses the role of family as a motivator and as a challenge. It will describe how students learn *familial and aspirational capital* not only at home but also at ASP and how they use it to shape their future goals and to form their college plans. Familial capital applies to knowledge (involving community history, caring, providing) that is provided among kin. This knowledge informs our “emotional, education, moral and occupational consciousness” (Yosso 2005 p.79) and can be fostered not only among close and extended family but also through sports, school and community settings. Aspirational capital is defined as the ability to sustain hopes and dreams in the face of perceived obstacles. Familial capital related to the immigrant experience allows students to create higher education and career aspirations that fuel their desire for a college degree. Interviews from high school and college students will show that family expectations, specifically related to gender, can be an obstacle when preparing for the college process and yet also serve as a major motivator for academic achievement for both boys and girls.

The final paper *The Struggle for Success Continues College & Beyond* deals with college students and alums of ASP. Using interviews and follow ups with students who

are now in the workforce, I describe how skills learned through ASP were helpful in navigating a higher educational institution and the workforce. My preliminary findings show that different forms of capital, including *navigational capital*, learned in ASP are transferrable to college and the workforce especially when alums are dealing with challenges such as discrimination. Navigational capital refers to the ability to maneuver through social institutions “not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso 2005 p.80).



## CHAPTER II

### “I AM BECAUSE WE ARE”: ASP AS A SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC COUNTERSPACE

*“It’s more of a personal thing ‘cus people can say ‘I’m going to college for my family’ but at the end of the day you’re the one doing it all. So even though at the end when you get your diploma and you get a job you’re helping your family a lot, before that you’re helping yourself.” Anibal*

Anibal’s hope of helping his family after he graduates from college is shared by thousands of other first and second generation Latino college students. The reasons for attending and staying in college are very complex and often involve socio-cultural expectations that may sometimes be a burden to them. However, many first generation college students use these expectations to motivate them through the harsh realities of higher education. Even though Latinos currently have more opportunities to attend four year educational institutions and enrollment is increasing, they are at high risk for not persisting in college (Phinney, Dennis and Gutierrez 2005). It is important to understand the specific obstacles faced by this population and to equally emphasize motivators in order to develop mechanisms within the high school and college setting to help students apply to college, stay in school and ultimately graduate. Perez and McDonough (2008) call for continued research in understanding how families, peers, high school staff and other networks play a role in the Latino/a college opportunity process.

My research focuses partly on relationships, specifically social networks via peers, family and mentors/advisors, which influence Latino students’ goals to attend a higher education institution. Often, the role of these relationships and the social expectations that come with them serve as motivators to attend academic support programs, academically succeed in high school and ultimately attend college. For this paper, I focus

on twenty six high school students who are part of Academic Success Program<sup>3</sup> (ASP). I discuss how two forms of capital (resistant and social) are manifested through specific sources of motivation- *defying expectations and peers* that college bound 1.5<sup>4</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Latino youth identified as helpful means to overcome challenges in order to attend a post-secondary institution.

I explore the following questions: What role does ASP play in shaping students' outlooks towards higher education? How does the program train students to transform negative interactions into motivators? How does the program provide students the opportunity to learn to rely on each other for motivation? I begin by presenting background on challenges that Latino students face as they attempt to navigate the college process and situate this study in CRT literature relating to community cultural wealth and two types of capital (resistant and social). I discuss my field site, my methods and then present my findings. Lastly, I discuss how my findings can enhance supplemental educational programming for first generation Latino college bound students, and perhaps for other groups as well. I believe that it is crucial for higher education administrators, educators, program coordinators, community leaders, families and students to understand the types of resources and motivators that are critical to effectively support students of color in their educational journey.

## **Background**

Higher levels of high school graduation, persistence through college and earning a

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used for group, staff and participants' names.

<sup>4</sup> The 1.5 generation (coined by Rubén Rumbaut) refers to people who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teen years, compared to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, who are born in the new country. The term "half second" generation can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rojas 2011).

bachelor's degree are key milestones which greatly influence future labor market outcomes (Kao and Thompson 2003). Nevertheless, educational inequality persists and even increases at the post-secondary level and gaps in college attendance have continuously increased for over two decades (Charles et al 2007). Latinos represent the fastest-growing student population in the U.S. public schools. Yet, there are significant racial differences on the factors that influence educational aspirations. For example, Latino students are less likely to aspire to attend a four year institution compared to Asian American, African American and White students (Hurtado et al 1997).

First generation college students face a number of obstacles such as lack of information on the college process, being less prepared academically for college and being less informed about financial costs and opportunities (Rogers 2011). Fortunately, scholars have found that students in these disadvantaged conditions benefit greatly from supplementary educational programs, extra family mentors and positive support networks (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Gonzales 2011). One of the most important ways in which access to college for first generation students of color can be achieved is by increasing college aspirations. Even though there are many mediators, such as parents, peers and teachers who have high academic expectations for students, these efforts are often amplified by after school programming that focuses exclusively on first-generation college students (Karen and Dougherty 2005).

There are currently over 2500 college access programs in the country (Rogers 2011). In the Greater Boston area, there are a number of federally and privately funded programs such as Gear Up, Upward Bound, Talent Search, Get Ready!, College Tomorrow among others. These programs not only play a crucial role in guaranteeing

college access to its participants, if they meet the requirements, but also serve as feeders for many local colleges in the Greater Boston area by having students participate in outreach programs (i.e. college fairs, college visits, multicultural overnights and events). Many of these programs have been modeled after well-known federal TRIO programs<sup>5</sup>, though these have often been criticized for not doing enough to ensure college persistence. Scholars (McElroy and Armesto 1998; Villalpando and Solórzano 2004; Tierney et al 2004) have given attention to evaluating the effectiveness of these programs, yet the *experiences* of students in those programs are often overlooked. For this reason, my study focuses on the students' experiences as part of these programs.

### **Literature Review**

Although there are many reasons as to why many Latino students do not persist, it is also important to look at the factors that help a segment of Latinos to graduate from high school and go on to college. The following section reviews some of the literature that is relevant to studying how Latino students develop motivators using resistant and social capital.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

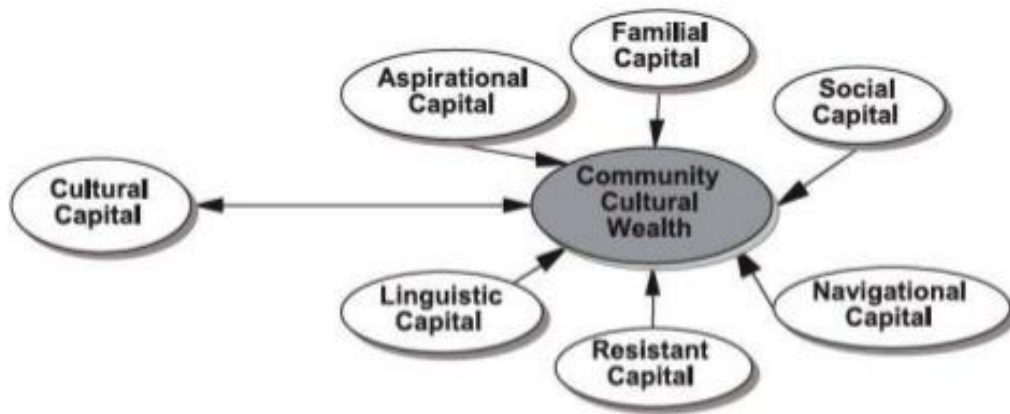
Yosso (2005) theorizes community cultural wealth as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to Bourdieu's cultural capital interpretation. Rather than viewing cultural capital as controlled by the dominant class, it is viewed as the accumulation of various forms of capital that may not necessarily be valued by the privileged. These different forms of capital (navigational, social, familial, aspirational, linguistic and resistant) are

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<sup>5</sup> Upward Bound was first introduced as a pilot program through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, followed by Talent Search a year later. The term TRIO was introduced in 1968 after the Higher Education Act of 1965 was amended to include Student Support Services (US Department of Education 2008).

part of a “dynamic process that build [s] on one another as part of community cultural wealth” (77). Using this theory, scholars are able to shift the focus away from a deficit view of communities of color and place importance on the cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by these groups.

**Figure 1. Model of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso 2005).**



### Resistant Capital

Students are called to engage in various forms of resistance strategies in different places such as schools, community organizations and at home. In her study of Dominican and West Indian high school students in New York City urban schools, Nancy Lopez (2003) pioneers the *race-gender experience framework* to better understand the way in which public places, such as schools, construct gender and race through interactions and structural relationships. The repeated experiences of what she calls gender(ing) and racial(izing) in public spaces have a cumulative effect which influences the way in which second generation youth experience oppression and see the role of education and social mobility (Lopez 2002).

Negative micro level interactions, such as racial microaggressions or racial jokes,

experienced by students of color, specifically Latino students, in an academic environment can directly affect their sense of belonging (Yosso et al 2009). Yosso et al (2009) found that one of the ways in which students dealt with stress, shock and anxiety produced by these negative interactions was by creating social counterspaces that allowed for a sense of community and a sense of family. These spaces, like my research site ASP, allow students to not only vent their frustrations but also cultivate friendships with people who share their experiences (Yosso et al 2009: 678).

As part of the Community Cultural Wealth model, *resistant capital* deals with knowledge and skills learned through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality in some form or another (Yosso 2005). The concept of resistance emphasizes that individuals in society negotiate and create meaning of their interactions with social structures. Resistance is a form of acknowledging human agency (Solórzano and Delgado 2001). Scholars agree that in the social sciences resistance strategies and actions tend to be focused mostly around working-class males and others have often been ignored. Solórzano and Delgado (2001) state that the majority of studies dealing with resistance focus on how youth engage in oppositional behavior that may reinforce inequality rather than social justice. The authors describe four forms of resistance including transformational resistance, discussed in this paper, which refers to student behavior that shows awareness of experienced oppression and a desire for social justice. *Transformational resistance* can take place using many forms, including “proving people wrong” (Solórzano and Delgado 2001; Yosso 2000). This is explained as a process in which students “(a) confront the negative portrayals an ideas about [group], (b) are motivated by these negative images and ideas, and (c) are driven to navigate through the

educational system for themselves and other [s]” (Yosso 2000 p.109). In addition, students may be actively socialized and guided by *transformational role models and mentors* who provide support and inspiration. Solórzano and Delgado (2001) provide examples of transformational mentorship among students involved in extracurricular activities. In their example, students were exposed to influential adults who were crucial in raising their class, social and cultural consciousness. Showing that social networks can be significant in exposing students to different types of resistance strategies

### Peer Support as Capital

Adolescence marks a time when peer interaction is very important in the formation of life trajectories since young people spend nearly twice as much time with same-age peers than with family members. Peer relationships have been found to influence a student’s day-to-day school behavior including how much time they spend on homework and their attitudes toward education (Ream 2005). Peers and close friends are helpful in defining which behaviors, values and attitudes are to be embraced or rejected (Vaquera 2009).

Those interested in studying the underachievement of racial and ethnic groups have often used the theory of social capital as an explanation (Ream 2005; Kao and Thompson 2003). This view suggests that some groups may lack potential resources embedded in social networks, which can then be converted into other forms of capital, such as human and material capital (Ream 2005). For example, peer networks and access to community resources may be an important form of social capital that helps explain educational outcomes including school completion and pursuing a college degree (Ream and Rumberger 2008; Yosso 2005).

In a study using the National Education Longitudinal Study between 1988-1992, Ream (2005) found that Mexican American students who experienced high residential mobility during their school career experienced low accumulation of peer social capital which in turn led to low academic achievement. For first and second generation Latino students, who experience numerous family and home responsibilities, the time they spend with friends is reduced-making them less likely to form friendships in and outside of the school setting (Vaquera 2009).

The importance of students' friendships while in college has also been shown to be a central link to navigating the transition to college (Bordes et al 2006). Perceived support from friends was positively related to persistence decisions but not related to grade point averages. In comparison to non-Hispanic white students who found social support from family to be more influential, researchers found that social support for Latino students came from friends, which created more positive views of the college campus (Bordes et al 2006).

Scholars call for more investigation on how minority students' relationships in academic settings, with school personnel and peers, facilitate the accumulation and transmission of resources (Ream 2005). In addition, it has been argued that previous studies dealing with social capital emphasize inequality and have not offered insight on ways individuals actually use social capital and convert it to educational advantages (Harper 2008). There are a number of places where students may be able to tap into these resources, however this study will focus mainly on the ways in which ASP allows students to access, develop and experience social support through peers in the program.



My research contributes to the findings above in three ways. First, I am focusing on students who belong to academic support groups as a way to better comprehend how their outlooks are shaped in those specific types of public spaces, specifically students of color who are often marginalized in academic institutional settings. Even though there have been numerous studies done in school settings, scholars call for deeper understanding of how these social processes are used in other public spaces such as community groups and college preparation programs (Villalpando and Solórzano 2004; Lopez 2003). Second, instead of attempting to explain whether or not these programs work; I'm interested in studying how academic support groups shape the experiences of students within them. Third, I'll show how ASP is an example of a counterspace where Latino college bound students learn and employ two forms of capital, resistant and social, by transforming often seen "negative" experiences into positive motivators and relying on their peers for support. These findings are important because they reinforce the fact that young people's outlooks towards higher education are shaped and transformed not only at home and at school, but also at a community level.

### **Design and Methodology**

This study used participant observation and in depth interviews as a way of collecting data. The Academic Success Program (ASP) is one of many federally funded programs in the Greater Boston area. It was initiated in 1989 and since then, has applied and been awarded five federal grants, each lasting four years. This program offers students with an individualized academic plan. During the school year, the student along with teachers, parents, guidance counselors and ASP staff work together to carry out this plan. Program participants are expected to attend ASP four hours a week, including two

hours of tutoring and one hour of test preparation (such as MCAS or SATs) and a minimum of eighteen academic counseling sessions. Participants are given a stipend of forty dollars a week and \$180 for the completion of the summer program. Students can also participate in community service, mentoring programs and college readiness activities such as college visits and college fairs. All students in the program must show that they are low income or/and first generation students between thirteen and nineteen years of age. In addition, students must show high level of motivation, a positive attitude, and desire to seek post-secondary education. Overall, the program has served around 300 high school students in the community since 1999 and has an 80% retention rate. Around 99% of the program graduates earn their high school diploma. During the last 10-year period the program has had a 95% college matriculation rate for program graduates.

During the summer, ASP participants are expected to be part of a six week academic support program which is held on a University campus. Students move into the residence halls, eat in the university cafeteria, and are expected to adhere by University rules and regulations. It is expected that students participate in over one hundred hours of formal instruction in mathematics, literature and composition, foreign language, science and English as a Second Language instruction (if needed). There are also weekly workshops that cover different topics such as goal setting, college planning, public speaking, social etiquette, time management and leadership.

There are two physical spaces for ASP, one (mainly used during the school year) located in the community they directly serve and the second (ASP2) at the University where the majority of my observations took place. At the time when data presented in

this paper were collected, the first site, ASP1, was in the bottom floor of a local community college in a city about forty minutes north of Boston. According to census data, 70% of the city's population is Hispanic/Latino (US Census Bureau 2010). For residents who are over 25, only about 10% have a Bachelor's degree and around 68% have completed high school (www.city-data.com 2017). The second site, ASP2, is located in a predominantly white city at a four year public university about 15 miles north of Boston. ASP2 uses University facilities such as office space in the student center, classrooms, two floors in a newly built residence hall and the cafeteria.

In order to identify and describe specific interactions among students and staff, participant observation at both ASP sites in addition to interviews, and informal conversations with students and teachers were all part of my data collection. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe that participant observation is in fact used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings. Even if the researcher uses in depth interviewing as a second method, participant observation is also necessary to note the interviewee's body language and reaction to questions or comments (Marshall and Rossman 2006). It was important for me to be able to observe the different interactions that happened not only among the students but also with among staff at both ASP sites. Moreover, by using participant observation I was able to see how students use ASP as a resource to gain access to important services such as advising to ensure their own academic progress and success.

My entrée to this group was a bit challenging, since I initially was observing and interviewing high school students and the summer program is only six very busy and crammed weeks. I was referred to this particular program by an Associate Dean at a local

university and contacted the Dean of Student Services who then put me in touch with Brianna, the director of ASP. After a number of email and phone exchanges, I submitted a research proposal along with parental permission forms and information regarding my IRB. Brianna later admitted to being wary at the beginning because she felt that she would not have time to direct me or to help me schedule interviews. However, her staff was essential to my being able to meet students, attend different classes, workshops, share meals with students and staff in the cafeteria and even attend their annual awards ceremony. In addition to volunteering time to the program (i.e., setting up chairs, monitoring students, greeting speakers), I was also asked to conduct two one-hour workshops for incoming ninth graders.

The data presented in this paper were collected during the summers of 2010, 2011 and 2012. During the first summer, I attended ASP1 when students were first brought together to prepare for the summer portion of the program and at the end of the program when students were getting prepared for their annual field trip. I was introduced as a graduate student doing a research project to staff and students from the beginning. Nevertheless, students were not necessarily interested in my research project and did not seem to mind my presence. For five weeks, I attended ASP2 two to three times a week for an average of fifteen hours a week. I was able to conduct the majority of my interviews in an office located in the student center. Since I was not allowed to ask students to volunteer for interviews, Rachel one of the staff members was crucial in helping me secure interviews during students' after dinner break. In-depth interviews lasted between one hour to one hour and a half and included open ended questions which asked students to discuss their academic goals, challenges, motivations and participation

in the academic program.

During the second summer, I was able to get to know the students better since most of them remembered seeing me around the previous summer. I spent an average of ten to twelve hours a week attending teacher meetings, community workshops, study halls, social events and for the first time got a chance to see the residence hall where students resided for the six week program. Academic Support Program hires college peer mentors for the summer portion of the program. The mentors I have observed in the past two summers have all been Dominican except for one, who was Puerto Rican, are a mix of 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, are graduates of the same high school and ASP alums. They tend to be either sophomores or juniors in college and have all left home to be on-campus residents. In order for mentors to be hired, they must be in good academic standing, interviewed by the program director and by a panel of current ASP students. I also had the priceless opportunity of eating dinner twice a week with the four college peer mentors and became familiar with their daily and nightly routines after the administrators were gone. This helped me observe and better understand their relationships with the younger students, who see them as older brothers and sisters.

During my third summer in the program, the director who had been there for many years left and moved across the country. This was a very unstable time for many of the students in the program since the majority of them had a really close relationship with her. They held a number of send-off ceremonies and awarded her parting gifts including pictures, certificates, jewelry and letters. Although the atmosphere was changing, they did hire a new director who used to be one of the teachers. He quickly took on the responsibility of hiring folks for the summer and tried to move things along. However,

all this change did cause confusion in terms of my role and it was a bit more challenging for me to procure interviews. Either way, I was asked to conduct three community empowerment workshops. Through these workshops, I was able to bring back ASP alums and with their permission, was able to use recordings of their presentations as part of my data. A total of twelve interviews were conducted and five additional stories were collected through two panels.

Although I consider myself an insider for many reasons, at times I was also considered an outsider from the students' perspective. I was an insider because I am a Latina student and speak Spanish as many of the students did; however all interviews started in English though we would switch back and forth between Spanish and English. I noticed this as a pattern especially when we spoke of family matters at home. At times, I felt as an outsider due to my ethnicity. I am Salvadoran and the majority of students whom I met and interviewed proudly and excitedly identified themselves as Dominican or half Dominican half Puerto Rican. Some of the observable implications to the way students treated me included formal salutations such as "Hello Miss!" and asking me questions regarding my college and graduate experience as well as my opinion regarding college choices.

During my three summers at this site, a total of thirty six in depth interviews were conducted with current participants, and alumni (see Table 2) and five were collected during a panel discussion for a total of 41 participants. Volunteers were asked to talk to me regarding their academic goals, their experiences in high school, academic motivations and their participation in the program. Participants ranged in age between sixteen to twenty one years old. The high school students were either juniors, rising

seniors (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade) or graduating seniors going on to college (Program Alums-college bound). The Program Alums, who were current college students, volunteered and/or were employed by ASP as College Peer Mentors. They had all attended the same high school in the city where ASP1 is located. The program alumni, who will be described fully in paper three, ranged in age from 22 to 40 and worked in different sectors around Massachusetts. In terms of ethnicity, all of them except for four women (two whose parents were from Puerto Rico, one from Venezuela and one Guatemalan) and two men (one from St. Lucia and the other from Puerto Rico) were either second generation Dominican or 1.5 immigrants from the Dominican Republic. All except three participants are first generation college students. I believe my sample was representative not only of the population of this city but also of the rising numbers of Dominican immigrants in Massachusetts. The area ASP serves is populated by the state’s largest concentration of Dominicans and has a 25.4% of foreign born residents compared to the state as a whole 15.2% (Granberry and Rustan 2010).

**Table 2. Academic Success Program Participants by Educational Level and Gender**

**N=41**

	Males	Females	Total
Program Alums (college students)	4	6	10
Program Alums (college bound)		3	3
High School participants (11th and 12th)	10	13	23
Alumni Panel (workforce)	2	3	5
Total	16	25	41
*Educational level at time of interview			

While conducting field work, I became attentive to the way in which students

would refer to each other as “ASP family” and the way in which this was evident in their everyday interactions with each other and with the staff. As I reviewed transcripts and field notes I looked for how the meaning of family was manifested at ASP.

Motivation and defying low expectations or “proving people wrong” in order to make their family proud emerged as major themes. I realized that there were differences in how the students’ families (nuclear and ASP peers and staff) provided motivation. My interview questions shifted accordingly during the second round of interviewing, in order to probe students about their interactions with their peers at ASP and why it was important to prove people wrong.

All interviews were audio taped with participants’ and parental permission (if the student was under eighteen years old). Interviews were then transcribed and all transcripts were reviewed during one round. I had begun to familiarize myself with some of the potential codes I may be using due to the repetition of phrases, descriptions of experiences and motivators shared by my participants during the interviews. During the second round of reviewing transcripts, I began to code first with a descriptive code which was a simple two to three word phrase. During the third review of transcripts I began to develop analytic codes and drafted memos which explained and described patterns in the data. Some of the codes relevant to this paper were: discrimination, community, motivation (financial, role model, peers, and proving people wrong). I analyzed twenty four interviews in depth (including college students), then reviewed an additional twelve to conduct two rounds of coding with the twenty six high school interviews only. Field notes were also typed, reviewed and coded.



## **Findings**

In order to find examples of how students learn to use resistant and social capital at ASP and how they see this process as beneficial, I focused on questions dealing with what motivates students to attend college, why they believe ASP is important and how they cope with challenges. Two themes evolved: proving people wrong and friends as support. Participants discussed constantly having to “prove people wrong”, which I refer to as defying expectations. They also shared ways in which their friends, and at times ASP staff, serve as a constant support network to help them cope and also access resources. These themes, discussed in more detail in this section, help to better comprehend how this segment of Latino high school students become inspired and remain determined to attend college.

### **Defying Expectations**

While all participants had similar reasons why they believed college was important and remained motivated through their family and peers to keep their eyes on the goal, around half of the respondents mentioned that one of the motivations to remain in high school, graduate and attend college in the future was to “prove people wrong”. Students told stories of teachers having low expectations of them and being very vocal in front of other students. For example, Kikii a Dominican 1.5 immigrant who had just completed her junior year mentions:

One of my teachers... said ‘you aren’t going to make it’. I said ‘listen, please, I will make it. I just don’t feel like doing your work, that’s it’. But I told him, I will do it and that I will make it, I proved it to him...I saw him the next year and he asked “how are you doing?” and I said “I’m doing my work Mr., I’m proving you wrong!”

Expressing that she just didn't "feel" like doing the teacher's assigned work is an example of oppositional behavior. This type of oppositional behavior which can spark resistant behavior has been found to have a positive effect on student persistence (Solórzano and Villalpando 1998). For example, when asked about why college was important Jenny, a sixteen year old junior, shares:

I think it's important because ...to me it's a chance to prove everybody wrong, make it somewhere in life and make people proud, especially my mom... I like to be a good student. I am friendly, I like to get to know my teachers and stuff like that...but there are some teachers that doubt my abilities due to the fact that I had other disabled brothers and stuff like that.

Jenny acknowledges that she has qualities that would classify her as a "good student" but that there are some teachers that doubt her abilities and points out that those are the ones she wants to prove wrong. Opportunities to engage in resistant behavior by way of interacting with teachers and other students were common.

Barbara, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Dominican and Puerto Rican student, attended a predominantly white Catholic high school for one academic year. Due to the number of micro aggressions she experienced during her time there, her mom decided to pull her out of the school and enroll her in public school. She shares one of the negative interactions between her and a teacher:

I was sitting next to a girl who was actually doing well in that math class and she was helping me with a problem and for some reason she cracked a joke and I started laughing. The teacher comes right there and blames it on me and says "I have one student who's not going to do anything with [her] life; I don't want *you* to be a part of that." Talking to the girl about me, I know it was about me. Trying to say she's not going anywhere so do not follow her footsteps.

This particular incident, although it happened more than four years ago, was still fresh in Barbara's mind as she became visibly upset when she described it. Sadly, there were many other stories similar to hers. For others, like Julicious, these interactions also

happened outside of school with peers. Julicious, a Dominican program alum, describes one of her dealings with a White student at an engineering conference:

We were the only Hispanics in the room and we were just looked at and stared down... I guess they have their impressions like ‘kids from [La Esperanza] oh, okay?!’ This [white] girl, actually, I was walking by... Her purse was behind because it was one of those shoulder sling backs, and when I walked by, she took that thing and hugged it. I was like ‘oh, calm down! I have my own purse, I’m not that type.’

These are examples of a racial(izing) interactions that shape students’ perspectives not only on their ethnicity but also on their higher education outlooks (Lopez 2003). Barbara felt labeled as a deviant due to her race and would “act out” as a form of oppositional behavior. Julicious had academically earned her right to be present at a well-regarded student engineering conference, and yet this *lived experience* (Lopez 2003: 7) reminded her of the way in which outsiders see Latinos from her city. While I acknowledge that these negative interactions between teachers and students limit mobility for the majority of students-the revealing part about using these incidents as an example of defying expectations is that Barbara, along with the other students, provided these negative (often racially discriminatory) episodes as *reasons and motivations* to attend college rather than obstacles or challenges. These situations provide the opportunity for each student to acknowledge their own status as Latino/a students from La Esperanza. During the interviews students were able to identify these episodes as ways in which they’re motivated to keep working hard.

As mentioned, “proving people wrong” as a transformational resistance mechanism is a process that entails confronting negative ideas about their ethnic and/or racial portrayal, becoming motivated by it and learning to navigate through it (Yosso 2000). Many participants have had the negative interactions with teachers, staff and

other peers but may not know how to make sense of them. Academic Support Program facilitates the process for students since program staff and administrators are well aware of the perception that other people have regarding the public school system in La Esperanza and the stereotypes that follow it. They acknowledge and play into the role of reminding students that they have to “prove people wrong”-a phrase which more than half of my respondents used repeatedly throughout interviews. My findings show that there were two principal ways in which students were taught and encouraged to use this resistance strategy. One way in which ASP teaches *how* to “prove people wrong” is through the speaker series which feature alums and people from the community who have graduated and gone on to pursue a college degree. Speakers are asked to tell their stories including their backgrounds, high school and college experience and why they believed it was important to get an education. Speakers validated many of the frustrations and hurdles that students faced as part of that high school and shared anecdotes of negative interactions with teachers and other staff. These events were held every Thursday afternoon. For example, Darius an ASP and an Ivy League university graduate shared that he wanted to give up every day but remembered that he needed to “prove people wrong.” He is considered a successful teacher and role model who volunteers routinely with the program and would be considered an example of a transformational role model (Solórzano and Delgado 2001).

Another way in which students are exposed to this phrase is through the weekly community meetings. They are considered to be “pep talks” where students are prompted to discuss a topic regarding their experiences in the program and served as the most important venues where different forms of capital were being taught. Briana, the director

at the time, shared success stories of previous students and reminds students that they too can do it (field notes 7/1/10). Stanley, a Puerto Rican junior says: “People have come back with a diploma saying ‘I did it’. People that Brianna has told us they were *horrible kids* in high school and we helped them they helped themselves. If they did it why can’t you?!” The use of this phrase along with students being able to openly describe and share stories of their own negative interactions with teachers and counselors is an example of how they create and experience safe, social counterspaces (Yosso et al 2009).

The saying “proving people wrong” is an example of one coping strategy which they can refer to when dealing with negative interactions with teachers, guidance counselors, and family members. This is important for this segment of students, who will more likely attend predominantly white institutions in the Greater Boston area, because it empowers them to draw from skills learned at their ASP community and gives them the ability to create counterspaces which may alleviate their college transition.

#### Peers as Motivators

Over half of the respondents mentioned their friends as one of the motivations to not only continue taking part in ASP but to also go on to college. Students recalled hanging out with the “wrong” crowd usually during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade and then making friends with other Latino students who had the same goals as they did. These goals included doing better in school, not getting into trouble, and attending college. While parents vocalize their expectations and are helpful in shaping students’ future goals, it is the *shared experience* among friends that provides the everyday support, motivation, guidance and encouragement. ASP plays a crucial role in fostering these shared experiences in a safe place away from home.

Stanton-Salazar (2004) notes that connections to school administrators, faculty and peers help shape desired outcomes. While some school staff (such as teachers and guidance counselors) may serve as gatekeepers, peers are key in mediating access to resources such as information networks and social relationships that lead to success (Stanton-Salazar 2004; Harper 2008). About one in three participants indicated having their best friend in the program and credited them for helping them join the program. In fact, many of my interviews were achieved because of word of mouth among friends. Nicole, a senior born in New York to Dominican parents, shares how she found out about ASP:

My best friend was in ASP since the 8<sup>th</sup> grade... we would constantly be like 'C'mon lets go hang out!' and she'd be like 'no, I have to go to my program'. She would constantly dedicate herself to her program. So I was like, I wonder about this program... This was the middle of my freshmen year. She got me an application, I filled it out, I came and talked to Brianna and I fell in love with it. I'm here to this day.

Nicole's best friend encouraged her to apply to ASP and they motivated each other to do well in school. This theme carried through college as well, Teresa a twenty one year old college junior says:

That person you interviewed she's my best friend. I don't know we just want to have a better future, like all of us because if you go to college it's for that most of the time. Yeah we motivate each other; sometimes we take like the same classes because we are the same year. Sometimes we compete with each other to see who has the highest grade; we always get the same grade. It's good to do competition.

Teresa and her best friend Chantel attended the same high school and college. Chantel also helped Teresa get a peer mentor position during one summer. Many of the friendships that are formed and fostered at ASP extend beyond high school, this is important in the building and reproduction of social networks which will be discussed specifically in the third paper.

Other students also noted the different types of friendships present at school versus at ASP, Smyrlen notes “My friends they don’t push me to do anything, I do actually have friends that motivate me because I am a procrastinator you know like most students are. They push me like ‘oh do your homework!’ ... Well usually the friends that would tell me that are from ASP, there are two or three that are just from school that tell me to do well.” Anabel distinguishes her friendships before joining ASP:

Well my friends before, I mean I could relate to them because they all came from a home that was going through a lot of things and we all kind of connected. They were just like me they didn’t want an education they just did bad things. Actually one of my friends [who was] with me since eighth grade [and I] decided that we need to change our lives. The friends that I have *now* are different, they are all going to college, they are all doing something in their life.

Nicole, Teresa, Smyrlen and Anabel all exhibit ways in which friends have exposed them to new resources including joining ASP and attaining employment. These opportunities have also been provided through connections with the ASP director and a few teachers at the high school. These adults work together to inform students about college visits, extra tutoring, employment opportunities, scholarships. They also serve as advocates for the students in dealing with enrollment into classes and family issues. Similar to students in Harper’s (2004) study, ASP students are routinely “activating social capital” to survive day to day academic and personal struggles which may cause distractions from attaining their goals.

In a study conducted with 112 first semester Latino college students, Bordes and Arredondo (2005) found that the students’ perception of being mentored and actually having a mentor were directly related to positive outlooks of their college experience and persistence. Academic Success Program highly encourages teamwork and peer mentoring. This is done in two ways: activities that target students in the same grade

(age) and hiring College Peer Mentors (role models). During the academic school year, participants are expected to spend four paid hours after school engaging in at least one activity. These activities vary and include health related workshops (i.e. nutrition, yoga, zumba), career related workshops (i.e. motivational speakers, career panels) and college workshops.

The majority of the time students attend ASP to do homework and receive tutoring if necessary. Students tend to sit together if they are taking the same classes and are working on the same project. This is true especially for upperclassmen enrolled in honors or Advanced Placement courses. However, most students arrive with their friends and “sit at large round tables and engage in their daily tasks amidst sounds of chuckling, indistinctive chatter and the occasional cough or deep sigh.” (fieldnotes) Participants consider this time as one of the benefits of being in the program as Jeremy explains “I tell them [other classmates] it’s fun, you’re basically doing your homework with your friends, and on top of that you are getting paid for that too!” After school homework time at ASP not only helps students with completing homework but also helps them bond with each other. It is another example of a social and academic counterspace (Yosso et al 2009) where they can openly talk about their challenges and goals. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to share academic struggles or negative interactions with teachers as part of acknowledging their status. Solangelis, a recently arrived Venezuelan high school junior, describes one of the many reasons why she appreciates attending ASP afterschool:

Sometimes when I don’t want to do stuff like that [homework] I feel down and I don’t want to do anything most of the time I talk to my friend because I feel like weird talking to my dad sometimes because he doesn’t know anything about that and he’s going to be like, “do it!” But that’s not going to help me, so my friends are who motivate me-so homework, we do it together.



For Solangelis, the time she spends in ASP doing homework with her friends is a valued and cherished time away from her adult-like responsibilities and reality at home. She arrived in Massachusetts three years ago from Venezuela leaving her mother behind and lives with her Dominican father. She credits ASP with helping her become more independent and allowing her to spend time with young people who have the same goals as she does “I have my father and all, but I spend most of my days with my friends. I get home at six in the evening. I spend my time there [ASP] with my friends and we do our homework and prepare ourselves, a little more every day.”

For the 1.5 generation participants who arrived to the U.S. within the last three to five years, friends also played a major role in helping them learn the ropes. Maria Cristina, a Dominican student who also left her mother behind to live with her father in the U.S., shares her experience as a newly arrived student “I started hanging out with different people my junior year...I found myself. Years before that you always feel like a little confused, do I belong here or in DR? Then I realized that I could be from both places.” Whether it was translating something they didn’t understand, practicing English or introducing them to other students, friends were there to lend a hand. Most importantly, it was through their Latino friends that students found out about ASP. The College Peer Mentors who are hired every year are also an important piece to the program. Many of the current high school students openly talk about coming back when they are in college and being hired in that position. One of the mentors’ main responsibilities is to live in the residence halls with the students and help them get a taste of what college life is all about. During the summer portion of the program, ASP conducts same sex activities in the residence halls, which are planned by the college peer

mentors. For the girls, these activities can be crucial because I believe it is one of the most important ways in which ASP successfully employs what Barajas and Pierce (2001) call “cultural translators”. In addition, peer mentors serve as transformational role models (Solórzano and Delgado 2001) in designing activities that allow students to develop different strategies to deal with difficult situations they may encounter in higher education institutions.

An example of one of the many activities conducted by the college peer mentors for the girls was done around the summer theme of “Ubuntu” or “I am because we are.” Quotes were gathered from Desmond Tutu’s book and a film, which was shown at a community meeting. The girls were asked to form groups based on their high school grade level. Their task was to discuss their assigned quote and discuss what it meant to each of them. However simple this may seem, this activity resulted in tears as they shared their deep fears of leaving home and heading to college. All agreed that though they each had great opportunities ahead, the responsibility of “making it” was far too much for them to bear alone. The peer mentors listened and counseled accordingly, usually with the same remedy: find people on campus who are willing to help, ask questions, become involved on campus and always reminded them that ASP was there to help advocate for them. Most importantly, the college peer mentors showed (by talking about their experiences) that support, guidance and understanding can come from mentors across racial and gender lines.

The experience with peer mentors that the young women at ASP enjoyed, however, was quite different from the one the young men encountered. During the summer of 2011, one of the peer mentors, who was an alum and employee of ASP, left

the program after many years. This proved to be difficult for the only other two young men in charge of overseeing residence life for the twenty-four boys. Their role was more of enforcers and overseers rather than nurturing, which was more evident among the women. The evening activities seemed to be more like punishment rather than bonding activities as the boys demanded that they are allowed to “just hang out” in their rooms. A group of about six boys retreated to a room and listened to loud music, while others left their doors open and did homework. The two College Peer mentors hung out in the hallway to keep an eye on the boys and discussed duties for the next day.

The type of closeness and bonding happening upstairs in the girls’ floor was clearly not present here. The program has a strong zero tolerance policy for hand holding, hugging or touching the opposite sex. It is common to see the girls hugging each other and greeting each other with kisses on the cheek, but the boys do not experience any type of physical contact other than the usual “dap” among friends. During a small workshop with fifteen sophomores on challenges and how students can remain motivated, a young woman was discussing her leaving Dominican Republic and her family behind. She began to cry and everyone in the room was silent, another young woman sitting next to her began to comfort her by rubbing her back and stroking her hair as she spoke. At no point did any of the staff enforce the zero touching policy and neither was given a warning. Throughout my time there, boys received more warnings than girls especially for misconduct and not following directions. In order to alleviate the amount of work among the College Peer mentors that summer, two new mentors were hired for the last three weeks of the program and they were both young women.

While all students subscribed to being part of the ASP family, boys lacked the close relationships with each other and between them and staff. Unlike the girls, boys' relationships with other peers of the same sex seemed to be influenced by age and grade level. For example, the four senior boys would always hang out together and with the other senior girls. They would also take part in informally sanctioning the younger boys (mostly 9<sup>th</sup> graders) by making comments like "don't act like that!" or "why would you do that?!" These interactions not only serve as a socializing tool in terms of acceptable behavior at ASP but also frame all relationships that boys may have by separating them from the "well behaved." The type of gendered process occurring at ASP suggests that even though academic and social expectations are verbalized and understood by everyone involved, the micro level interactions happening on a day to day basis among students differ for boys. Thus, gender affects the ways in which both girls and boys experience friendships and relationships in this setting.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges that Latino first generation college students face are widely shared by other minority students. However, due to the low college graduation rates among Latinos and the large Latino immigrant community in the United States it becomes a notable topic to discuss. My interest in studying the challenges and motivations of 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation students was first a concern over the significant disparities in higher education attainment among different Latino ethnic groups. I decided to approach the issue by first interviewing college graduates and current college students and then found a pattern in what they mentioned as their motivation to go to college-family, friends, belonging to an academic support group or a community organization. Using participant

observation and in depth interviews, I conducted research at an academic support group to see first-hand the types of interactions and relationships formed at these places. My findings provide details as to how this group of Latino students use resources provided by an academic support group to develop resistant strategies and social capital to academically succeed and attend college.

I demonstrate how ASP serves as a counterspace where students are able to hear stories from people who have shared backgrounds and where they can feel like their stories are validated. I discuss ways in which they use resistant strategies and peers to shape their academic goals. My findings provide further evidence that peers are an integral part of academic success, goal setting and overall achievement. The young men and women interviewed in this study are part of a small segment of students who experience some advantages within the high school setting through their social network built through ASP. This is one limitation of my study, since I only focus on those who have been awarded the opportunity to be part of a distinctive group based on their academic achievements and future promise. ASP provides students with the opportunity to be around others who share the same goal of graduating high school and attending college. The program makes it possible for students to form relationships with mentors and young adults from the community who can serve as cultural translators and give them a peek of what life could be outside their comfort zone. Most importantly, it gives students tools to feel empowered when faced with negative interactions due to discrimination. However, other issues such as the lack of cultural references, which according to scholars (Villalpando and Solórzano 2008 (Villalpando and Solórzano

1998), Barajas and Pierce 2001) are essential in encouraging biculturalism, would be an interesting topic to further study.

## CHAPTER III

### HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT AS A FAMILY SACRIFICE

*“Well the norm was...you come to the U.S. you work in a factory or you work in a hotel in housekeeping like a lot of my cousins do. College was never an option. Like, you weren't going...you basically were not good enough is what my family members were saying.” (Michael-college graduate, higher education administrator).*

Michael's quote describes the pressure that many first generation immigrant students experience from their family to work after high school instead of planning for college. Michael's choice of attending college rather than working after graduating high school was something that was out of the ordinary among his extended family. However, his actions marked the path for two of his siblings who are ASP alums, college graduates and currently in the workforce. Often, the educational gap and failure of Latino students within the academic system is blamed on the lack of capital, resources, and interest of families. When looking at student success and college attendance, the culture of Latino families has historically been positioned as a deficit.

This paper focuses on how ASP students viewed family influence on aspirations, high school experience and college attendance. I use 37 interviews with first generation immigrant high school and college students to discuss how family and ASP play a critical role in creating *familial and aspirational capital*. I explore the following questions: To what extent do the experiences of ASP students' parents motivate students to succeed? How do students interpret and use those experiences to set future goals? How do parents verbalize family expectations? Does that process vary by gender? I discuss my methods and present findings. Based on my data, I argue that the Latino families in my sample benefit from “community forces” (Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Zhou & Kim 2006) and are able to provide a unique form of aspirational capital which is reinforced by ASP as part

of guiding students to academically succeed. I discuss the process by which this is achieved and how this segment of students benefit from knowledge passed on by family members.

### **Literature Review**

The following section provides a background to understand how the role of Latino immigrant families is viewed within the educational realm. I discuss how familial capital (in the form of familism), which includes transferring of stories and experiential knowledge, is described in the literature as a deficit for students as they try to navigate the educational system. I explore the challenges of incorporating familial capital within the school setting and how “community forces” can serve as a mediator for allowing parents and students to form educational goals. I emphasize the ways in which Critical Race Theory can allow scholars to focus on the positive and crucial knowledge families provide students.

#### Role of Latino Families

A cultural value that is contested within the Latino achievement literature is *familism*. This concept means pride; loyalty and closeness in the family, which in turn results in family obligations coming before any individual needs. In contrast to the values of individuality and independence present in the U.S. culture, familism requires an individual family member to make personal sacrifices for the sake of their family. There are numerous studies which show how family obligations can be positive for young people. Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) found that college persistence was an outcome associated with family obligations. Young adults who did not do well in high school were more likely to stay in college if they had a stronger sense of family obligation by



emphasizing their role in supporting and assisting their family. In a study done on women attending college, Sy (2006) found that Latina college students who spent more time with their families while attending college had higher achievement and lower school related-stress. Therefore, familism may be positive when students are able to use it for emotional and mental strength.

Other scholars argue that familism can also have negative outcomes, if it discourages young people, especially women, from following their dreams and places the family's needs first. According to Sy (2006:369), this emphasis on personal sacrifices is further reinforced among Latinas by *marianismo*, which "emphasizes the self-sacrificing role of females and highlights the role as family caretaker." Research indicates that Latina students often suffer greater stress during their college career than Latino men (Sy 2006). Consequently, many Latinas experience conflicts between following the traditional female role and the non-traditional role of pursuing higher education (Phinney, Dennis and Gutierrez 2005). Even though research has shown that Latino parents do value higher education, daughters may experience extra pressure to continue to fulfill their family obligations as they make the transition to college (Sy 2006). This adds additional time and stress which could make the transition to higher education institutions very challenging.

In her study of Latino/a high school students, Ovink (2014) discusses the importance of looking at the "(re)production of intersecting gender and racial/ethnic beliefs, attitudes and behaviors" a process she calls *gendered familism* (p.4). While the majority of the students in Ovink's study agreed about the benefits of an education, her study shows that gendered familism influenced the ways in which students interpreted the

value and meaning of college. For example, Latinas were more likely to view a college degree as a path to financial independence. Most importantly, Ovink (2014) found that students' college choices and pathways (women attended more four year institutions) were marked by gendered familism.

Lopez (2003) found that men, regardless of age, were rarely expected to assume family obligations dealing with caretaking, thus their frame of reference was different than that of women. Young men did not personally identify with their mother's struggles and therefore had a difficult time evaluating choices about education, career and family life (Lopez 2003:132). Nevertheless, in her study of African-American and Latino urban youth Carter (2005) found that the majority of the males subscribed to traditional beliefs about gender roles and desired a good paying job to better provide for their families. Latino families and values, such as familism, are publicly blamed for school failure and the rhetoric of parental involvement (or the expectation that parental involvement leads to academic success) fails to acknowledge that schools are structured to fail students of color. Recent ethnographic studies show that the voices of Latino parents are silenced within schools in many negative ways such as implementing bureaucratic requirements and disregarding Latino knowledge and culture (Villenas and Deyhle 1999). As with many other communities of color, the knowledge, beliefs and worldviews of Latinos are not validated or taught in schools or through academic curricula. Compared to their middle and upper class peers, students from working poor families live in communities where resources are limited. They attend schools that are understaffed and underfunded. Their lived experiences are not reflected in formal school curricula, textbooks or other learning materials (Zhou 2008). Students, often bilingual, bicultural and living in poverty,

who have not been raised within the “culture of power” are left in a disadvantaged position for learning the tools needed for academic success (Nieto 2010). Nieto (2010) points to evidence that some educators do not see the experiential and cultural strengths that bilingual hold. These students are considered “walking sets of deficiencies” and/or “culturally deprived” (p113) not just because they may be bilingual but also because they may come from single parent households. She explains that these views lead teachers and schools to rationalize low expectations of what students are able to learn and how much they can actually achieve. In addition, it leads to a process of negation of different types of knowledge that students may bring to classrooms.

Scholars have brought attention to the refusal of educators to validate the experiences of students of color and urged for a more open definition of knowledge (Nieto 2010, Delpit 2006, Moll et al 1992). Most importantly, the kind of first knowledge that students bring to the classroom-that which is taught by families. For example, it is a common practice to require students to speak English only and discourage conversations in other languages. In addition, schools encourage parents whose first language is not English that they should only speak English with children in order to build vocabulary. This can affect the way in which students maintain important connections with their family members and communities (Nieto 2010). Incorporating “funds of knowledge” throughout the curriculum is considered a productive way of integrating family knowledge in student learning. That process entails acknowledging cultural differences and validating them by focusing on the experiences and skills of all families in order to encourage learning in the classroom (Moll et al 1992, Nieto 2010).

## Familial and Aspirational Capital

Critical Race Theory provides a framework to allow scholars to focus on the types of capital which although not valued by the mainstream, can provide students with the tools to shape aspirations, career goals and ultimately graduate high school and college. Delgado Bernal (2002) extensively discusses the ways in which students develop strategies in order to navigate higher educational institutions. Specifically, she studies Chicano/a college students and the knowledge that they obtain through family and community to successfully confront discrimination and other obstacles in higher education. Using Latino Critical Theory, what may be perceived as a deficit in a predominantly white culture, such as bilingualism and family obligations, can be best understood as a knowledge base (Bernal 2002). Bernal considers household knowledge such as bilingualism, biculturalism and commitment to communities as part of this knowledge base that “interrupts the transmission of official knowledge and even helps students navigate their way around educational obstacles” (Bernal 2002:113). In fact, evidence shows that biculturalism or the ability to identify and function in two cultures is associated with psychological benefits such as perspective taking (Schwartz et al 2013). Bernal (2002) found that students who embraced biculturalism and recognized that they served as role models for younger siblings, cousins and other family members were better equipped to persist in college. In addition, commitment to helping their communities and families served as a form of inspiration to fight through struggles. Experiences and skills passed on by family are important when considering student achievement. *Familial capital* refers to family experiences and skills that are nurtured among kin and carry a sense of community history and memory (Yosso 2005; Delgado

Bernal 1998). Yosso (2005) describes familial capital as a form of cultural wealth that provides a commitment to community and relates the meaning of family to encompass a broader understanding of kinship. Extended family such as uncles, aunts, grandparents and friends help to nurture this knowledge and to access resources within the community. Other forms of familial capital which are key to helping students are strategies for coping, caring, moral, emotional, educational and occupational consciousness (Yosso 2005:79). This type of consciousness is fostered and transferred within and between different families and through school and community settings (i.e. ASP).

Previous literature that examines the role of community and school processes explores the ways in which academic performance, aspirations and motivation are influenced. Latinos and Latinas benefit differently from connections to their community. As shown in numerous studies, Latina students are more likely to report higher levels of aspirations, higher GPA's and perceived social support than Latino male students (Lopez et al 2002; Sanchez et al 2005). However, most studies tend to focus on formal school settings only. Looking at how other community sites such as ASP may influence sense of community and belonging among students is beneficial in understanding not only how familial capital can be mediated through counterspaces but also to see whether or not such spaces help to lessen the academic gender gap.

The acquisition of familial capital gives way to *aspirational capital* which is another form of cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) describes it as the ability to “maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). Aspirational capital is manifested in different ways, but a good example is through the work of scholars who show that although Latinos may have low educational outcomes

they still maintain high aspirations for the future (Lopez 2003, Gandara 1995, Yosso 2005).

My research contributes to the literature above in two ways. First, I will use data to show how this segment of students receive and interpret familial capital and how it's used to generate aspirational capital. Specifically, familial capital related to the immigrant experience passed on by parents which allows students to create higher education and career aspirations that fuel their desire for a college degree. Second, I will show that ASP is a social community space which supplements and takes part in creating and fostering family knowledge. ASP is a place where students are able to interpret familial capital and it is here where they are taught how to transform some of that knowledge into aspirational capital which generates into tangible academic goals. ASP is an example of a community force/non profit organization that provides students with the space to discuss their challenges (within families and school). It helps to lessen the feeling of "other", and reminds students that they're not the only ones struggling with different issues. It is here that they are able to share similar backgrounds and struggles. Parents are also incorporated into the college decision and college going processes and therefore learn to trust ASP to help their children. Examples of this- interviewing process, potluck dinners, calls from counselors and staff, knowing parents by first names, serving as hosts for exchange program, awarding parents for involvement at end of year banquet, providing opportunities for parents to meet each other, serving as a go to resources for dealing with schools.

## **Data & Methods**

Interviews with 26 high school and 11 college students will show that family expectations, specifically related to gender can be an obstacle when preparing for the college process and yet also serve as a major motivator for academic achievement for both boys and girls. Twenty-nine of the students in my sample came from single/divorced/never married female households while only three came from blended families (stepfather/stepmother) and five lived with their both of their biological parents. All of the parents in this sample are foreign born. Regardless of family composition and background, all 37 students admit to having at least one parent (usually mother) who voices academic expectations. In order to present data for this paper, I focused on four questions “Why do you think college is important?” “Why is higher education important to your family?” “How has your family helped you with the college process?” and “How has ASP helped you with the college process?” A few themes were discovered, and will be presented in three categories. First, students shared the ways in which parents would bring up their experience of migrating from their respective country (Better Future). Second, mothers would encourage female students to work hard so they would not depend on men (Pa’ Que Te Mantengas!). Third, family expectations of student completing degree so he/she could financially help the family (Family First).

I use critical race methodology in education to challenge previous research based on deficit models, which silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color (Delgado Bernal 1998; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). Using this lens, I reviewed and re-coded all 37 transcripts and focused on the ways in which students felt inspired, motivated and supported by parent (s) and extended family. CRT framework allows me to focus on how

students' parents and extended family pass on different stories related to life in their native country, survival in the US, working in low paying jobs, learning a new language and most importantly-making sacrifices for their student. My findings show that students' aspirations and goals were influenced by immigrant stories which parents shared mostly in the context of reminding students why they should dedicate themselves to academic success. These stories (which I classify as examples of familial capital) worked as cultural and aspirational capital by allowing students to develop a sense of possibility (Bettie 2002; Gandara 1995). Validating immigrant students' source of motivation from their siblings, community members, parents, and other family members is an example of how we can use this framework to give voice to our students of color.

### **Findings**

The data presented in this section reveals the ways in which students interpret the role of their family in their pursuit of a college degree. For many, families were a motivator to remain in school and persist. Familial capital in the form of parental expectations for higher education was expressed by: a) discussing their immigrant stories and providing a dual frame of reference (Better future); b) insisting that young women earn a degree in order to achieve financial independence (Pa' Que Te Mantengas) and c) reminding students that they are responsible for providing financial support to the family (Family first). These expectations were transformed into aspirational capital such as: persistence (ie active participation in ASP, defying expectations, family as motivator, serving as a role model) and future career/academic plans (college pathway, graduating high school and college).



## Better Future

All students identified at least one member of their family (parent, sibling, niece, nephew, grandparent, uncle/aunt) as one of their motivators to graduate high school and attend college. For the majority of students who shared stories about their parents' expectations-they often involved recounting how they immigrated to this country and the sacrifice that she/he had made to be in the United States. Jade, a Dominican 18 year old high school senior, describes her mom's scolding:

She was like 'you know how much we try? We give you guys everything you guys want and you guys can't even do this, you can't even bring a solid A report card home. There is no need for that. We work overtime just to give you guys whatever you need. You know how many kids in DR can't afford a notebook and a pencil, and you guys have them here roaming around everywhere! Like, there is no need for that.'

In this quote, Jade's mom expresses her dissatisfaction with her kids not being able to bring home an A and reminds them that most children in the Dominican Republic do not have the resources that they have. Jade shares with me her interpretation of her mom's constant scolding as she herself argues with her younger sibling over his grades. She mentions that she encourages her brother and reminds him "you need to take all that into consideration, you know how much they are working". Jade feels responsible for not only her own academic success but also her brother's. Among the three sets of siblings in my sample, all the older siblings embraced the responsibility of guiding their younger brothers/sisters and cousins.

The expected exchange between parents and children/students is voiced often and it involves a reminder that parents made a sacrifice to come to this country, leave family behind, work overtime and that the student needs to take advantage of the opportunity and resources and do well in school. Maria Cristina, a seventeen year old Dominican

student, was sent to the United States “on vacation” but never returned back home to her mother. She lives with her father, her stepmother and her sister who has special needs.

She shares her father’s words:

“I didn’t have the opportunities you had so you have to take advantage of all that you have” he’s funny my dad is funny. Ok! You told me that yesterday, and he’s like “I just don’t want you to forget” I tell him but look at my report card look what I am getting.

As her time approached to visit and tour colleges, Maria Cristina experienced a death in her family back in Dominican Republic and she had to make a decision of whether or not to stay in the United States or return to Dominican Republic. With the help of her ASP friends and her father, she decided to stay “He was always reinforcing it, ‘you need to do something with yourself’ because none of his other children went to college.” Her active participation in ASP allowed for the extra peer support she needed in making a decision. Being surrounded by other students who had the same goals as her, kept her in track as she continued the college application process. In Maria Cristina’s case, she toured top liberal arts colleges in New England but her father was not fond of the idea of her leaving home:

He [father] doesn’t like it. When I say that I can’t wait for college, I want to live on campus. I want to go away. Like recently he told me “I don’t know how I feel about you leaving”... I am [like] what?...He said “you can commute.” I was like that’s not a possibility buddy. He’s like “why not?” I said “because I am not staying in [Esperanza]” I want to explore and travel I want to know new places.

Her story is similar to many other young women in my sample who are told that they should take full advantage of opportunities and attend college. However, my female participants encountered this in two ways-either they were fully supported to go off to college (preferably a women’s college) and bring back the “American Dream” or were told to stay home and commute to the local state university or community college.

Regardless of whether or not female students wanted to live away or stay close to home, parents were the main influencing factor in the decision.

In her study of Latina college students, Rodriguez Martin (2010) discusses the point of transition in entering college- a new world that seems frightening and risky for both students and parents. She finds that parents lacked the skills to help their daughters make decisions. They struggled with anxiety, fear and some resisted options and choices that involved daughters moving out of state (Rodriguez Martin 2010). In this case, ASP provided the information and knowledge that parents needed to move through this transition and help their children. For example, Brianna the program director, was highly trusted and had a close relationship with many of the parents who had seniors in the program. Students referred to her as their “second mother” and constantly expressed their desire to make her proud. Due to the fact that she had been there for seventeen years and had seen students enter the program in either eighth or ninth grade, she had the ability to answer many of the parents’ questions. As part of the ASP programming, staff host monthly financial literacy and college preparedness workshops for students and parents. In addition, they lead financial literacy workshops for parents of seniors.

A segment of students experienced the migration process themselves. Chantel, who was born in the United States, moved back to Dominican Republic and then returned to the United States at age six after her parents’ divorce. She identifies with her mother’s struggle:

It’s unfair for me to not get a college degree to not pay her back. The least you can do for your parents is get an education. I work at the same place as my mom I am a waitress and she works in the kitchen, she prepares little dishes for big parties. It’s sad because of the language barrier, in one week I can make over 700 dollars while my mom works forty hours and she would get maximum like 350 dollars....I see how my mom works hard and gets home tired and it’s like you

wish your mom didn't go through that but it makes you a better person so in the future you can give her so much back.

Students were also aware of family turmoil that surrounded their journey to La Esperanza. Having the ability to witness and live through different struggles allowed them to differentiate between life in their country of origin and life in the United States. Michael describes his mother as his main motivator for graduating college, "all the struggles we had in our life. Um, my dad was very abusive [to] her and she didn't want us going down that path with her, with him." Stanley, a seventeen year old Puerto Rican and Dominican student, who migrated with his mother also shares:

So my family was here and my aunt was here. My mom planned to come here a long time ago, she was married back then and she didn't come. Then my father left her by herself and came here to get more opportunities and they got divorced. Back then Puerto Rico wasn't as bad as it is now, education was better...but now it's all going down so we decided to come here to get a better future for us.

Even though my study includes a very small sample of men, my findings show that young men used a dual frame of reference, which allowed them to evaluate their parents' situation. Although contrary to Lopez' (2003) findings, who did not find men making these arguments, my sample is different from hers, in that this group of students is situated in an *advantaged educational position*. Similar to Barajas and Pierce (2001), I define this as high school students considered successful because they are college bound. In regards to participants who are college students, they are advantaged because they have made the transition to college, achieved grades necessary to be admitted and planned on graduating. Furthermore, my sample contains students who have already been chosen to be part of ASP because they have been referred and supported by either a guidance counselor or a teacher at their high school.

Martin explains his mother's influence on his choice to attend college:

The whole reason why she [mother] made the sacrifice to come to the United States and the only reason why she works in a restaurant washing dishes for over 40 hours a week is because she wants us to be educated. She wants us to have a better life than what she did and have more options...than what she had.

Martin's motivations rely on first acknowledging his mother's struggles and financial situation due to lack of options and then rewarding her for her sacrifice. Students see part of their obligation as children to seize opportunities granted by ASP and to reward their parents (in most cases mothers) by doing well in school and aspiring to go to college.

Jeremy, a Dominican second generation junior, identifies his father as his motivation to graduate high school:

It would mean a lot to my father, like when he was a kid when he just came from the Dominican Republic ...he graduated from high school he didn't know what financial aid was... So when he went to a school they were like making him pay, he thought he had to pay everything right there so he just didn't go. He passed his marine test and everything but he didn't go [to college] because he didn't know what financial aid was.

We see in Jeremy's words the notion that his father's lack of opportunities when he arrived to this country prevented him from achieving his goals (becoming a marine, attending college). The fact that Jeremy uses this unfortunate episode in his father's life to describe his motivation to graduate high school and attend college provides an example of how he believes he will reward his father-by taking advantage of opportunities provided to him and graduating high school. These opportunities include being an active member of ASP and participating in tutoring after school in order to maintain a grade point average that will allow him to attend college.

Jeremy is the youngest of two children. He credited his older sister, Jade, for getting him to see the benefits of being involved in ASP and for serving as his role model.

There are a two aspects in the above excerpts that are important to my analysis. First,

students are able to contrast their own lives, educational goals and aspirations with their mother's struggles with relationships, jobs and economic instability. Lopez (2003) refers to this phenomenon as the "dual frame of reference" in her study of Latinas in New York City. Even though my sample only contains eleven males, all except for one, discussed his mother's hardships in securing a better future for the family. Second, the understanding that children and parents are engaged in a reciprocal financial relationship (Gonzalez 2011). Children are made aware of the financial situation of the family and many are encouraged sometimes expected to contribute. This connects with the other two themes discussed in this paper.

#### Pa' Que Te Mantengas

In her study of second generation West Indian, Haitian and Dominican youth, Nancy Lopez concluded that young women consistently evaluated both educational and employment goals against their mothers' experiences with hardships (Lopez 2003). All students in my sample, both men and women, were well aware of the limited opportunities their parents had because they had immigrated to this country. Attending college was not an option either because they were forced to make a living by working low-paying jobs or they didn't know how to go about the college admissions process. Nicole, a self-identified Latina<sup>6</sup> of Dominican heritage explains, "College is important to me [because] I watched what happens when you don't go to college. I've watched my mom suffer... because she doesn't have money." Nicole's words resonated with a number of my participants. Respondents discussed not wanting to be in the restricting positions their parents or family members experienced as a *motivation* to attend college.

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<sup>6</sup> The majority of participants ethnically identified themselves as either Dominican or Puerto Rican, rather than Latino/a.

In describing their reasons for wanting to go to college, both men and women acknowledged their parents' hard work but the women were more vocal about wanting to succeed and not having to work as hard as their moms or sisters while the men talked about rewarding parents by attending college.

Samantha, a Puerto Rican born Dominican graduating senior, describes why college is important to her:

I think college is important because basically I look at my parents especially my mom, because she always comes home tired... [she'd] have to clean like 100 rooms in one day...I started looking at that and I really don't want to be like that at all. I don't want to have that job where I clean after people.

Nicole and Samantha's interview excerpts point to a major theme found in my interviews, recognizing their parents' financial struggle, low status within their occupations and desire for a different economic future. Similarly, Carter found that students' family realities and community contexts help to form and shape expectations about financial aspirations (2005:97). My participants were anxious to take whatever opportunities were granted to them in order to not have to work as hard as their mothers and to have a better future. Parents were very vocal about their expectations, "my mom was always telling me you need to go to college, you need to be someone later on in life 'pa' que me mantenga<sup>7</sup> this and that" (Jade), "I think about my parents they say 'if you bring a C here we are going to have problems!' That's what motivated me academically" (Anabel).

Similar to Rodriguez's (2010) findings, the twenty six young women in my sample experienced pressure to succeed both academically and personally. Imani, a Dominican college student describes why she plans on graduating college:

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<sup>7</sup> "so you can support me" (financially)

Well, definitely because I'm the first one in my family setting an example for my brother and myself. I see what my sister went through. She didn't even finish high school and she's now 25 with two kids struggling. And that's definitely not gonna be me.

Many of the female participants recounted stories of sisters, aunts, cousins who had worked tirelessly to attain the little that they had. Mothers reminded students of their struggles and created a home environment where they were expected to achieve academic, financial success and serve as role models for doing it. Part of this discourse was mothers' expectation that daughters should not depend on men for financial stability and that romantic relationships should be avoided for now. This is evident in the messages that many of the young girls received from their mothers. When asked about how her mother inspires her, Kiki- a junior in high school says "[mami] tells me to forget about boys. They're not important, don't listen to the guys. If you date a guy, remember that school comes first and the relationship comes second." Other advice passed on from mothers to daughters was based on experience. When asked about what motivates her to not give up when she's tired or stressed, Maria Cristina thinks back to when her mother shared how her decisions regarding a man (MC's father) limited her opportunities:

My mom, like I remember when she told me. This is what I remember when I am about to give up. "No te quedas estanca[da] haz lo que yo no pude hacer."<sup>8</sup> Because my mom just stayed a junior in High school. She got pregnant [with] me when she was twenty one and my dad was married.

In this excerpt, Maria Cristina's mother decides to tell her daughter about the circumstances around her pregnancy. Even though MC now lives with her father in the US, he was a married man and although he financially provided for her when he could, they never had a relationship while she was growing up. Her mother married and so MC

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<sup>8</sup> "Do not get stuck! Do what I couldn't do"



grew up with a stepfather whom she called “dad.” Although this episode is somewhat painful for both mother and daughter, it remains as one of the most important memories that fuel MC’s desire to succeed.

I interpret this form of familial capital geared towards females as an example of what Ovink (2014) refers to as *gendered familism*. Latinas in her study reported feeling pressure to succeed educationally and financially at higher rates than Latinos. This pressure can serve as motivation to persist when experiencing stress. These findings also challenge the notion that familism can hinder socioeconomic success and that it limits opportunities for growth. Instead, my findings show evidence for how familism can serve as a source of positive support for both academic achievement and college attendance (Valenzuela and Dornbusch 1994).

All participants in my study yearned for financial independence, and they shared the same source of motivation which was to help their families and pay for their sacrifice. However, young women’s romantic relationships were often regulated by mothers and ASP. One of the ways in which I noted this was through the hall meetings moderated by the female mentors. Their role as “cultural translators” (Barajas) allowed for the younger girls to have conversations about what it was like to live on their own, in a residence hall and away from parents. Amidst the inevitable questions like “are boys allowed into your room?!” and “can you just leave whenever?” there was always one mentor who would add the occasional “*tienes que cuidarte!*”<sup>9</sup> followed by giggles and/or curious looks. These exchanges in hall meetings, which were all female (women) spaces, operated in different ways to endorse independence but with responsibility. Ultimately, younger

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<sup>9</sup> “You have to take care of yourself!”

participants still in high school were able to see that the mentors were fulfilling their responsibilities as college students while having fun but also focusing on helping their families. Additionally, the behaviors described to “help family” were different for women than men. In the next section, I discuss some of my findings regarding this topic.

### Family First

In this section, I will discuss the ways in which students interpret their family’s expectations regarding financial resources. Students are also expected to be role models for other family members and be rooted in their community (come home often, travel back to their respective countries, etc). The data presented in this last section focus on two findings. First, all students were expected to attain a degree in order to contribute to the family financially and be independent. Second, both male and females were encouraged by family members and staff at ASP to serve as role models.

According to Rumbaut and Komaei (2010), white native born young adults between the ages of 18-24 tend to receive more financial help from parents. Immigrant young adults often do not live with parents and experience some of the highest levels of poverty within the US economy. Studies show that the pattern of financial support among immigrant young adults is quite reciprocal and more often reversed (Rumbaut and Komaei 2010). For example, Fuligni’s (2002) study of over 1,000 immigrant and non-immigrant families found that immigrant children with high levels of academic motivation had a greater sense of indebtedness and financial obligation to their families. Moreover, young adults who were classified as Latin American were significantly more likely to provide financial support to their parents and siblings than other non-immigrant individuals. Students in my sample voiced their determination to attain higher education,

their struggle in graduating college and their wanting to secure job that would allow them to live comfortably and help other family members.

During one of the three alumni panels that I hosted as part of my work at the program, one of the alumns (Ashley) who is a teacher at La Esperanza high school shared with the students that “leaving college was not an option” and that even though she had received a great scholarship to attend a private institution, she did not receive any financial support from her family. She had to work over thirty hours a week to make ends meet:

I was very busy. I took every job I can find and kept switching jobs to get a better pay. When I came home from work my roommates would be setting up parties or partying. I couldn't do that I had to study and do homework. I thought it was unfair and I had to suck it up. At the end that wasn't the first memory I had in college but that was a memory that I was angry- and had to [financially] support myself.

The quote presented above is an example of Ashley's realization that her college experience wasn't the same as her peers. One of her memories in college was being angry that she had to work and support herself. Her priorities had to be different than that of her roommate's and having to work in order to be able to stay in college allowed her to appreciate her struggle. This was part of her fuel to graduate.

For high school students attending ASB, preparing and planning for college was also a product of financial struggle. Jenny shares, “I just want to help my mom financially. She's my number one person that influences me the most. When you finally say, I did it, I made it. That kind of feeling. When you don't have to worry anymore. When you can support yourself financially and your family...like the weight off your shoulders been lifted.” Many of the girls discussed caring and providing for their family members. In Nicole's case, when asked for her reasons to attend college, she shared that

her grandmother had taken care of her when her mother was not in the picture for some time:

My grandmother has been through so much. She's basically my life, she's like my mother...I want to be able to support her when she gets older, or when I get older, be able to put her in a home and be able to like, give her money and pay for her surgeries if necessary.

Like Nicole, Kiki wished to work hard to provide a better living situation for her sister, who also suffered from health issues:

My sister is an inspiration. My mom encourages me, if I look at my sister and she smiles at me (inaudible) my parents are not going to be able to stay with us forever, they are going to leave someday. Then it's going to be me and my sister, so I have to work hard to make sure that her life is comfortable, because she has been through a lot of things with me (inaudible) I have to take care of her.

Students who had experienced financial uncertainty understood the responsibility they had to their family. Leaving home and going to college in order to have an education leading to more job opportunities were significant risks they were willing take if it meant that they'd be able to help their family.

Being a role model and/or serving the community were constant messages that students received from ASP staff and peers. Whether it was guest speakers discussing the importance of helping others or the push for students to complete community service, all members of the program had heard about the importance of "making it" in order to help younger siblings, cousins and younger members of ASP. One of the summers during which I spent time conducting participant observations, students chose "Ubuntu" as the summer theme. During move in day, while students were nervous about living on campus for the next six weeks and citing that fear as a reason for not completing homework, Brianna decided to show a short film depicting the concept of *Ubuntu* in Africa. She

reminds them that it's a privilege to be part of the program, that it's their responsibility to help others in their community and that they cannot "forget those you leave behind."

These messages were embedded in everyday activities, lectures and talks. Consequently, students would use how they interpreted those messages to explain why college was important and how they were motivated to academically succeed. Anabel, a university graduate who had just graduated high school at the time of her interview, comments:

College is important to me because after getting that college degree I can help out my parents, my family and also I want to come back to the community and help out these [La Esperanza] kids who have no hope in education... I used to challenge myself because I used to think about my younger siblings at home. I am their role model so if I do something bad they are going to be like well she did this so I can do it too.

Maria Cristina shares the same goals:

Well, college is important point blank. This is what is going to make you who you want to be in life. I am going to college because I want to achieve my goals; I want to be somebody that people look up to. I want to help my community too.

In addition to serving their community, students also understood the responsibility attached with obtaining a college degree in regards to being role models to family members. Martin says:

College? It's very important to me because I know it's going to take me far in life. It's part of a very important evolution I am going through and I continue to go through as I grow, mentally. But it's important in terms of me expanding my options in the future. Pretty much being a role model for my family so I don't think I can pin it down for this main reason because there are many reasons why I am going to college.

The above excerpts are examples of ways in which students interpret the concept of "giving back" which is what I interpret as how they rationalize doing something that no one in their family has done, and sometimes having to leave family and friends behind. It is a way in which they connect to their families, their peers and their community and ease

the fear of the unknown.

### **Conclusion**

These findings show that students' perceived role in their family is crucial for shaping their college goals. Participants used family expectations as a way to motivate themselves when faced with challenges. Instances where parents or other family members shared their immigrant experience created a sense of duty to fulfill future expectations. By way of comparing life in their native country versus life in the United States, parents created a dual frame of reference for students. I believe that this is important to explore for two reasons. First, the current literature continuously portrays family obligations as obstacles for students, especially women. This study shows that familism as experienced by students in the home and in this community space is crucial in shaping and achieving educational goals. An alternative framework should be explored in order to understand how and why students, especially girls who experience the same level of family obligations are academically succeeding and attending college. How does their participation in the academic support group affect this? While friends, mentors, the academic support program, and teachers were all mentioned as important to what motivates the respondents academically and personally, the majority of the respondents identified family as the main motivator for succeeding academically. These findings supported Valenzuela and Dorbusch's (1994) claim that familism was associated with higher academic achievement. Whether it was rewarding parents or being role models to younger siblings and cousins, their family was the main motivator to academically succeed and aspire to attend college. My observations show that ASP recognizes this: parents and extended family are a major part of the ASP programming.

Parents have a chance to meet during the beginning of each school year and also get to know each other during different social events that ASP puts together throughout the school year such as award ceremonies and field trips. Inclusion of family members during the college planning process can be a helpful tool to inform parents but also to make the transition to college easier for students. For example, institutions of higher education can improve opportunities for Latino students by including their families in the educational experience and recruiting and promoting Latino faculty and staff.

Secondly, there are cultural and ethnic practices occurring among these families and communities which I believe have not received much attention. My findings provide evidence of the ways in which 1.5 generation youth are able to embrace their own immigrant experience and use it to frame a positive outlook on life chances. Focusing on the strengths that immigrant families provide through their storytelling, for example, can be useful in discussing future academic goals with students. This can be helpful to academic and career counselors, teachers and community workers since it provides an opportunity to value and validate first generation students' experiences.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STRUGGLE FOR SUCCESS CONTINUES: COLLEGE & BEYOND

*“I had a very difficult time defending myself because I was living a double life between boarding [at] school and La Esperanza...I’m Latina and yes I like my ‘mangu’<sup>10</sup> but I play ice hockey and I listen to music that my friends never heard of and you start to understand parts of yourself, part of your environment and being yourself. You learn to compromise and not give up who you are.” Ashley*

Ashley’s quote gives us insight into the internal struggle that first generation college students experience. Indeed, learning how to navigate two worlds as a first generation immigrant or a child of an immigrant and a college student is one of the most noted skills learned by my participants. This paper focuses on college students and alumni of Academic Support Program (ASP). While many studies on immigrants focus on stress, low academic achievement and other problems (Schwartz et al 2013) this paper addresses a gap in research on the strengths, perseverance and resiliency that immigrant students demonstrate. Using a Critical Race Theory approach, I analyze fifteen interviews with ASP alumni and six follow ups with those who have completed their bachelor’s degree and are now in the workforce. I describe what students identified as the challenges they faced in predominantly white institutions (PWI) and discuss how they overcame those challenges. I show examples of how this segment of students converted different types of capital (specifically social, cultural, and aspirational) learned at ASP into navigational capital that allowed them to succeed in college and obtain career outcomes. Specifically, students relied on social networks (social capital) and either created or joined counterspaces on campus. They also drew from resistant cultural capital learned at ASP, such as engaging in specific behavior, choosing how to present themselves and

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<sup>10</sup> Traditional Dominican plate of smashed plantains, sautéed onions, fried cheese and salami.



speaking in public, to create what they considered a successful college student. In addition, students converted aspirational capital to create a sense of their own accountability by believing in themselves, holding themselves accountable to ASP and family, and knowing they have responsibility to give back.

### **Background**

Educational attainment among Latinos in the United States has been rapidly changing over the past decade properly reflecting the increase of Latino students in the K-12 systems across the country. Even though the high school drop-out rate has decreased and college enrollment numbers have increased, Latinos still lag behind in obtaining bachelor degrees from four year institutions. Differences in college preparation which may lead to underperformance in four year institutions play an important role in maintaining this gap. Massey et al (2003) cite measurable differences among whites, blacks and Latinos in the United States. For example, Latinos and blacks are less likely to take Advanced Placement courses in high school, have lower SAT scores and earn lower GPA's.

According to the Pew Research Center, there are a number of disparities affecting the Latino population in regards to educational attainment. While education was cited as a top issue in 2014 alongside the economy, 66% of Latinos who did not enroll in college and instead entered the workforce or the military right after high school noted that they needed to financially support their families compared to 39% of whites (Krogstad 2015). It can be argued that improvements have been made in decreasing the percentage of high school drop outs from 32% in 2000 to 14% in 2013. However, Latinos still have the highest drop-out rate compared to blacks (8%), whites (5%) and Asians (4%). In addition,

nearly half of Latinos who go to college attend two year public institutions compared to 30% of whites and 34% of blacks (Krogstad 2015). Thus, the largest percentage of Latinos attending college are actually enrolled in the higher education segment that does not produce the greatest returns for college graduates (Contreras 2005). These statistics support the gap in post-secondary educational attainment which shows that in 2013 only 15% of Latinos between the ages of 25-29 had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 40% of whites and 20% of blacks (Krogstad 2015).

Research comparing foreign-born and native-born undergraduate students shows the resiliency in foreign-born students and also the unique challenges they face. For example, immigrant students tend to have more family responsibilities and may not be well prepared for college coursework (Teranishi et al. 2011). Consequently, many decide to enter two year institutions in order to receive remedial course work.

Overrepresentation of Latino students in two year colleges may lead to different educational and career pathways and at this point not much is known about Latino students in four year institutions, or Latinos with bachelor's degrees. It is important to look at these students as "exceptions to the rule" (Bettie 2002). In order to learn more about high achieving, first generation Latino students living in an economically distressed area<sup>11</sup>, who attended four year institutions, I conducted one on one interviews with fifteen college students and six follow up interviews with bachelor degree recipients. This paper explores the common challenges, stemming from racism, they identified at their respective college campuses. Most importantly, I show examples of how they converted

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<sup>11</sup> Economically distressed areas (EDA) are characterized by: poverty rate of at least 20% or more than average state rate, unemployment rate that exceeds 25% more of the statewide average (<http://www.mass.gov/hed/economic/eohed/bd/econ-development/eligibility/etaeoa/>)

and transferred skills learned at ASP in order to develop useful navigational capital to achieve educational and occupational goals.

### **Literature Review**

The following section provides a background to understand important challenges that Latino/a students face in post-secondary institutions. I discuss the ways in which social class is considered the basis for many of the obstacles all students of color face. I discuss Critical Race Theory and its role in understanding how students of color are able to confront challenges and become successful in predominantly white institutions.

#### **Challenges-Social Class & Academic Success**

Social class is a key aspect to understanding the challenges that Latinos face in predominantly white four year institutions. The majority of literature focuses on how social class stratifies students' access to cultural and social capital. Although students may come from low income families and neighborhoods with schools that do not prepare them for college work, not much research has been done on alternative ways in which students may have access to supplemental educational programs-like after school programs, summer bridge programs, etc. In addition, determining how social class impacts low income, high achieving, first generation college students (like those in this study) can be complicated for various reasons.

First, the indicators used to measure social class as it pertains to academic preparation and access to higher education have traditionally been defined by parental educational attainment, occupational status, income and wealth (Aries 2008). These indicators are not always applicable, for example some students in my sample had parents who received post-secondary degrees in their country of origin but currently held lower-

paying jobs. Some families owned properties, businesses and had accumulated some wealth in their countries, yet these factors do not always influence a student's financial security.

Second, much research on low income students of color derives from the assumption that students are "disadvantaged" because of their race and class background (Yosso 2005). An example is "deficit thinking" which explains that minority students and families are responsible for poor academic achievement (Yosso 2005). As a result, academic institutions strategize and work from the understanding that they must help "at risk," "underprivileged" and "deprived" students. This interpretation does not leave any room for identifying any strengths, contributions or valuable forms of capital that students may bring with them which would allow for academic success.

It is generally assumed that students' process of learning cultural capital that can lead to academic success (for example engaging faculty in academic contexts) happens during early childhood (Jack 2016). Some studies have shown that immigrant students show signs of success in different post-secondary indicators like credit accumulation and transfer rates (Teranishi et al. 2011). Therefore, there is still much research to be done to explore how interactions outside of the family and home context can derive cultural capital that students can utilize in their transition to and completion of college. There is a lack of understanding of how low income immigrant students living in economically depressed areas are able to acquire academic cultural capital and what mechanisms are at work.

In his study of 89 Latino and black undergraduates at an elite university, Anthony Abraham Jack (2016) looks at how social class can affect strategies for engaging

authority figures in college. While middle class college students reported being comfortable with interacting with faculty and staff, lower income students experienced two different paths. Those who attended boarding, college preparatory high schools or what he calls “privilege poor” were proactive in engaging with authority figures and showed behaviors similar to middle class students. In contrast, lower income students who were tied to their often distressed community referred to as “doubly disadvantaged” felt uneasy when forced to interact with authority figures like faculty (Jack 2016). His study supports the idea that while social class presented itself as a challenge for students, those who had been exposed to academic cultural capital that is valued in college settings-were able to use it to their benefit in succeeding in college. This gives scholars the alternative to think beyond early socialization, parental educational attainment and individual wealth when studying academically successful low income students.

### Critical Race Theory

In order to understand and explain the disparities in college graduation rates among students of color, or in this case Latino immigrant students, it is helpful to examine the systemic and structural barriers that students experience. Many first generation Latino college students struggle with financial resources, inadequate college preparation, and the consequences of racism and discrimination. Villalpando and Solórzano (1998) discuss the ways in which CRT is a helpful framework to pinpoint, evaluate and transform different aspects of higher education that perpetuate subordination of students of color. For example, it provides scholars alternative perspectives and methods to understanding the processes by which people of color are marginalized because of their race, gender and class.

Predominantly white universities and colleges reproduce and transmit dominant values and ideologies which do not regard contributions by people of color. Therefore, students who have been historically marginalized, underserved, oppressed and essentially excluded have been taught to view themselves and their experiences as negative, something to be ashamed of and ignored (Villalpando & Solórzano 1998). Exposure to this negative discourse contributes to campus environments that can sometimes become racially hostile towards students of color, affecting the way in which they experience their learning environment. Numerous studies (Harper 2008; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso 2000; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Rodriguez 2010) have discussed the different ways in which PWI's unreceptive environments can negatively affect sense of belonging, academic achievement, social integration and overall persistence. Racial tensions and feelings of inadequacy often lead minority students to feel alienated and stressed (Lopez 2005; Rodriguez 2010). First and 1.5 generation immigrant students may experience greater levels of stress, feelings of marginality and alienation as a result of adapting to a new host society (Ellis and Chen 2013).

I'm interested in looking at the small segment of first and 1.5 generation immigrant students, who despite feeling marginalized, alienated and excluded managed to persist in predominantly white colleges/universities. Due to the common practice within academic institutions to value cultural capital derived from experiences of people within the dominant class, different ways in which other groups often convert cultural practices into capital are ignored (Carter 2003). Villalpando and Solórzano (1998) discuss the need to look at how students use other forms of sources like family, language and oral histories to develop *resistant cultural capital*. Alternatively, resistant cultural

capital is defined as a response to domination and being able to acquire and transform this type of capital is a source of empowerment for students of color.

Carter (2003) discusses the ways in which students from low status communities juggle dominant and non-dominant forms of capital. Students in her study, mainly African American, recognized the importance of strategically using both forms of capital in different spaces such as school, community and family spaces. The process included constant evaluation of the social context and negotiation in terms of which behavior, speech styles and other markers were needed. For example, students may draw from their non-dominant capital to create, sustain and expand their peer networks. Consequently, they were able to gain valued status positions in their low status communities and in society (Carter 2003).

#### Surviving College-Navigational Capital

Scholars have looked at the ways in which racism serves as a source of physiological and psychological stress. Mainly, focusing on the different types of coping strategies used by people of color to reduce perceived threats. While there are maladaptive coping strategies that may lead to substance abuse or alienation, adaptive strategies such as action oriented or problem focused coping can result in better outcomes (Watkins 2012).

Ideally, academically successful students of color are able to develop critical skills to maneuver through different institutions that are not created with people of color in mind such as PWI's (Yosso 2005). For example, they may draw on social networks within their families and communities in order to do well academically despite stressful events and negative conditions. Within the Community Cultural Wealth framework, this

is defined as *navigational capital* (Yosso 2005; Solórzano & Villalpando 1998). This type of cultural wealth, as explained by Yosso (2005), is developed and accumulated in experiences where people of color need to conduct transactions or negotiations with institutions that may not be open to the needs of people of color. Specifically, students of color are able to develop skills and competence for navigating academic institutions all while advocating for themselves or others (Yosso 2005; Zell 2014).

Previous studies by scholars (Barajas & Pierce 2001; Zell 2010; Zell 2014; Carter 2003; Harper 2008, Truong & Museus 2012; Truong, Museus & McGuire 2015) have provided evidence for the benefits of creating support networks among undergraduate and graduate students of color facing racism. Peer networks are crucial forms of social capital that act as sources of support, information and knowledge about different resources available within the university.

This study looks at the processes of converting different assets, like peer networks, into forms of capital needed to succeed in higher educational institutions and the workforce. Some of the questions I use to guide my findings are: How important and useful are the different types of capital in navigating the college environment? How are students able to deal with new set of challenges away from home and ASP? What support systems did they find in college? Did they use any skills learned in ASP while in college? If so, how? Anthony Jack's work on the doubly disadvantaged and privileged poor, discusses the experiences of transitions to college and interaction with faculty. Do ASP students classify or show signs of privilege poor even though they come from a distressed high school with lack of resources? Does ASP provide the context for them to become "privileged"?



## **Data and Methods**

I completed a total of twenty one semi structured, in depth interviews: fifteen one on one interviews conducted in the summers of 2010, 2011 and 2012 which are part of my larger study and six follow up interviews during the summer of 2013. All had participated in ASP and graduated from La Esperanza high school. All except for four were current students at different stages in their college career during the time of the first interview. These interviews lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours and were conducted at the field site, which was a medium size, predominantly white public university about forty minutes from Boston. The remaining four participants were interviewed as part of a panel/focus group conducted during the summer of 2012. Two had attended Ivy League schools, one had gone to the military right after high school and had begun a PhD program at the time of the panel while the other had recently graduated from a private four year institution. Three out of the four were high school teachers, two of whom worked at La Esperanza High School and the third at a charter school in a city about ten miles from La Esperanza. The first round of questions focused on personal goals, aspirations and their experiences with ASP program. Participants' roles within the ASP program were varied, all of them except for three students were peer mentors working with high school participants for the summer. The exceptions were graduates of ASP who were visiting the program and volunteered to sit and interview with me.

The follow up interviews, which totaled six, were conducted with five students who had graduated college and were employed full time and one student who had just graduated and was in the middle of job searching. The second round of questions for the six follow interviews were more targeted to gathering information about the specific

skills they had learned as part of ASP, how they used them through college and in looking for work. Questions also focused on their experiences at predominantly white colleges/universities, challenges and motivators.

**Table 3. Number of Participants and Types of Institutions Attended post High School**

<b>Follow Up Interviews N=6</b>				
Males	Females	4yr Public Institution	4yr Private Institution	
3	3	5	1	
<b>ASP Alumni &amp; College Graduates N=15</b>				
Males	Females	4yr Public Institution	4yr Private Institution	Military
7	8	8	6	1

For the first round of interviews, I focused on the following questions from the interview guide: Are you the first person in your family to attend college? Why is a college degree important to you and your family? Tell me about your school? Why did you decide to attend that school? What were some of the challenges you faced? How did you overcome those challenges? How did your family feel about you leaving La Esperanza? What are some of the skills you learned in ASP that have helped you succeed in college? A follow up interview guide was created to focus on themes that came up during the first round of coding. Some of the questions included in the follow up interview were: Did you belong to any groups or organizations? If yes, how did you become involved? Respondents were asked to describe their relationships with faculty and staff and to describe the process of applying for employment. I was also interested in

finding out whether they had been involved with ASP after graduating college and if so, in what ways.

### **Findings**

In this section, I will expand on two of the major themes found in the data “Walking Stigma” and “Creating a Successful College Student.” Each of these themes represents the common difficulties that my participants encountered. I first give examples of some of the challenges and obstacles that individuals identified during their college journey and/or in the workforce and then show how different forms of capital were used in order to develop successful strategies.

#### Walking Stigma

All participants described feeling out of place in their respective college campuses. Whether it was how they were perceived by others on campus because of their race and the fact that they came from La Esperanza, or their own insecurities about their abilities-students struggled to deal with what many described as “culture shock.” The data showed examples of how racism was embedded at an institutional level and the ways in which students experienced it individually on a daily basis. For example, participants attending prestigious four year private colleges/universities were often the only representatives of La Esperanza at their predominantly white schools. For the other students attending four year public colleges/universities, they had been recruited and accepted as a type of cohort through direct, established working relationships with ASP.

Five of the students who were part of my study attended the same 4-year public college and two attended the same private four year by way of having access to admissions staff and specific recruitment programs like overnights, transition/bridge

programs and multicultural receptions. ASP staff played an integral role in forging networks and getting colleges to tap into the academically advantaged students at La Esperanza High School. In addition to giving students the opportunity to attend these competitive colleges, students benefitted from meeting other minority students and creating a support system.

All students except for four attended small (less than 5,000 students at time of interview) colleges and being identified as minorities because of their race, nationality, and hometown presented a different set of challenges. In La Esperanza High School, where the majority of students are Latino/a, my participants were considered high achieving and bright. But in college, students quickly understood that they were judged on their race/ethnicity rather than their abilities. For example, Michael explains:

I feel like um, Latinos are looked down, as not smart enough, and not capable enough to do the things they tell you to do academic wise. I feel that there is a stigma on just Latinos in general that they are not able to achieve higher education that that's not something for them. That that should only be kept to white, white people.

Michael was born in New York City and moved to the Dominican Republic where he lived until he was fourteen years old. He returned to the United States after his parents' divorce and settled in La Esperanza. Even though he faced negativity from some family members, "college was never an option...you basically weren't good enough is what my family members were saying," he was able to graduate high school. Michael attended a four year small public college, earned a Master's degree from a private four year school and is currently employed full time in a higher educational institution.

Similar to other studies, my participants' perception of prejudice and discrimination on campus and in the classroom affected their sense of belonging and their overall social experience (Cabrera et al. 1999). ASP alumni identified different ways in which higher educational institutions expose students of color to hostile environments. During one of the alumni panels, when asked about what was the most difficult challenge they faced in college, Denzel- an Ivy League graduate and current teacher in an urban middle school shared:

That's a good question, I feel like in college it's probably when I felt like I wanted to give up the most... Just feeling like I was an outsider, I honestly didn't feel like that was the place for me. There were times when I was like 'what the hell am I doing here? Am I an affirmative action case, was I just accepted to Ivy League because I was a minority and am I smart enough to be here? Am I confident enough?' There were always those questions. 'Is it because I am a minority?' It was those moments where I had to realize that I worked hard to get there.

Denzel's doubts about whether or not he belonged in college is a sentiment that is shared by many participants in this study. Sadly, these findings are similar to previous work done on Latino/a college students which suggests that Latino/a students did not believe that they were smart and rather described effort, perseverance, and self-belief as qualities that allowed them to be academically successful and graduate college (Cavazos et al. 2010). Other Ivy League students would often respond in what was described as "pure shock" and "disgust" when he revealed the city he came from. The prejudice and blatant negative stereotypes attached to what it means to come from La Esperanza categorized students and added another level of stigma (in addition to race and low income) that made them feel isolated regardless of the type of institution they attended. Previous research shows the prevalence of negative stereotypes, attitudes and expectations towards students of color by their white counterparts (Massey et al. 2003; Charles et al 2009;

Harper 2008). For example, Latino and black students were rated as more lazy and unintelligent than whites and Asians (Massey et al. 2003). Other students like Julio, who is a graduate of a reputable four year private college, also experienced negative stereotypes in being perceived as a criminal:

I think it's kind of depressing when some says 'oh you're from La Esperanza? Are you part of a gang?' They see you from a different point of view. It's easy to do that... as you grow I think you're more educated to not say that. I had it kind of the hard way. I had roommates who have told me 'I can't stand you' because they can't understand me culturally. I had to turn it into this: I understand why you don't understand me and no I'm not a gang banger and this is where I'm from.

Julio's experience with ignorant assumptions from his college peers extended outside the college campus. After graduation, he secured a teaching job at La Esperanza High School. The reactions from his college friends did not change:

I experience it [prejudice] all the time. I told my friends from college where I graduated from that I was going to teach in La Esperanza. They go 'are you crazy? You're going [to] get jumped.' They made it seem like students were coming in to class with knives stabbing teachers; I don't know where that came from. To be honest it really pissed me off to the point I invited them to La Esperanza to see what it's about...I tend to teach in [La Esperanza] to push these kids for a better future.

Julio's motivations for getting through college included being able to return to his community and teach at his high school. Graduating college, getting a teaching job at La Esperanza were two great accomplishments for which he and his family felt pride. The reaction he received from those he believed to be friends caused him anger and pushed him to get involved in the community (as ASP volunteer) so he could do his part in dismantling these stereotypes.

The consequences of dealing with prejudice on college campuses, not only caused students anger but also forced them to rely on strategies they had used before to keep

themselves focused. For example, Barbara who attended a four year private college in hopes to study law describes her reasons for “sticking to her own kind”:

Overall the school is great. Academically I have no issues. Socially it becomes hard because I am one to sort of stick to my own kind. It's bad to say...I just feel more comfortable. Certain things you want to talk about ... certain things you want to say... certain comments or you want to speak Spanish and some people just don't understand. They are like, “What does that mean?” Or because if you say something in English because of your slang back home people don't comprehend.

Like Denzel, Barbara believes that she can be successful when it comes to academics but the social environment at her school is difficult to navigate. Students described joining different organizations on campus that focused on supporting students of color. Whether it was a Latino/a club or a Culture club-students felt more comfortable around others who identified as people of color. Consequently, finding these counterspaces on campus led to many other benefits outside of just socializing with other students. Participants were able to use social capital to form networks with other students and exchange inside knowledge with older students that allowed them to seek out academic, financial and career help. Imani, a graduate of a competitive four year private college and current social worker, comments “It was hard adopting to a predominantly white environment and the workload. And socially I was fine because there were a lot of minorities who were like me...In my school the minorities all stick together...even in classrooms you'll see us in the corner.” This finding extends previous findings by scholars looking at the role of social, religious organizations and external community organizations in helping students of color, in particular, make a smoother transition to the college environment (Hurtado & Carter 1997; Harper 2008). In the case of my participants, joining affinity

groups on campus and surrounding themselves with other students like them (in regards to shared race/ethnicity) provided a sense of security and safety.

The benefits of these friendships in college extended outside the classroom for more than half of my participants. During their senior year in college, students began to look for employment opportunities back home. This proved to be difficult, but each of them was able to make plans for the next year through networks that were built in ASP and in college. For example, Michael returned to ASP and worked as a staff member for a year. He then applied to a graduate program for two years and now works as an administrator in a four year private college. He credits ASP director and other staff with helping him get into graduate school and hopes he can fill that role for other students, “For me, ASP is always going to have a special space in my heart no matter where I go [and] what I do. I still keep in contact with them. They [ASP students] text me all the time. [I try] to keep that line open with them.” Michael, like all of the participants I followed up with after college graduation, continue to be involved in ASP through alumni events and other networking dinners and visits to summer site.

Nael, a graduate from a public four year medium size university, struggled to find employment for a few months and this really affected his self-esteem. Fortunately, one of his friends from school offered him a job as her assistant. He reflects on the importance of learning how to network and how this skill is a valuable tool he learned at ASP:

I met her at [university] and that’s why I think that networking is so important especially in a college because you don’t know if you need help in the future. Like in my situation, I needed a job and she offered me it. Things like that you really need to network as much as you can... Network with other students, ASP taught me that. Different, groups and clubs helped me because without that I wouldn’t feel at place or that I belong somewhere. To be honest I would have probably dropped out of college if I wouldn’t have had clubs and ASP supporting me.



In the summer of 2015, Nael attended the annual ASP banquet and reconnected with current and past ASP staff and students. While there, he discussed his interest in teaching abroad with one of the previous ASP directors who was working for an international school at the time. About six months later, Nael packed his bags and moved abroad to teach English. With the help of the previous ASP director, he was able to get his application materials submitted, which allowed him to get an interview and eventually the job. These are only two examples of how ASP alumni were able to use one of the main skills that ASP encourages, networking and relying on each other, to gain employment opportunities. Other respondents utilized their relationships with ASP staff for more informal assistance with employment such as letters of recommendations and serving as references.

#### Creating a Successful College Student

This section focuses on participants' tireless efforts to adapt, integrate and succeed within their new learning environment. More than half of my participants indicated that language proficiency was the challenge which required the most effort. Whether it was interacting and communicating with professors or writing papers for courses, participants acknowledged numerous weaknesses and described how they worked with peers and trusted mentors to succeed. In doing so, they relied on familiar strategies taught in ASP to present themselves in what they each considered to be "good college students."

Despite students' anxiety and nervousness about leaving La Esperanza, their family and ASP to attend college, the most difficult hurdle was yet to come. All

participants mentioned that they did not feel prepared to compete academically. Imani shares:

It was so hard. Oh man, so hard. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to overcome. Transition from La Esperanza High to [private, reputable four year college]. I was always a good student, things just came easy to me. But when I got there, I was so intimidated by all the other students. And like the professors. They were good but there was so much work and my writing wasn't the best and there writing is so important, well it is everywhere where you go to college.

Imani's experience echoes that of many minority students. Previous studies have looked at how minority students experience leaving their family, friends, home and neighborhood to attend college. The task of navigating competitive academic environments, adjusting to new living arrangements and the stress of having to deal with family pressure can all be intense negative experiences for many students of color (Charles et al. 2009; Rodriguez Martin 2010). All participants except for three identified their weakness in academic language proficiency as the factor that stressed them out the most. Interactions with faculty, peers, administrators involving what they believed to be prejudice due to the way the student spoke, wrote or expressed him/herself led to feelings of inadequacy and non-belonging, especially during their first year.

Nael's experience exemplifies this finding well. He chose to major in a department where people of color were underrepresented and not only was he one of a handful of men of color, but also the only person from La Esperanza. Nael shares his perspective:

I sometimes feel like I am not smart enough, I want to pick the right words... I think I just lack confidence you know what I mean. When I get nervous you know, and in college it's hard. One day I had a professor ask me if I speak English, I was so nervous I froze and couldn't say anything. I think it was because of my accent, I definitely have an accent [it] is a challenge. I feel like, I was born and raised here, why do I have an accent?

This passage shows one of the many ways in which Nael encountered racism and discrimination in the classroom. His professor doubted his ability to speak English, even though he was an enrolled student taking the class for credit. Nael blamed his feelings of nervousness and anxiety on his lack of confidence as many of the other high achieving students in this study emphasized. Several stories about racial spotlighting in the classroom were shared, however none of the students mentioned talking to professors or bringing this issue up to administrators.

These findings are especially significant for male students of color in higher education. Similar to Black male colleges students (Harper 2008), all seven of my Latino participants in this study reported feeling overwhelmed by academic expectations. They recounted interactions with faculty, peers, staff that made them question their preparedness for college work. Javier, who is a graduate of a four year public college, was another example of the type of negative interactions with faculty. He describes:

I'm not a great speaker, public speaker. When it was time to present something during class I used to get nervous and I still do because you hear people speaking 'good' English using all those words and you come and when you stand up you worry if you have an accent, mispronounce something. [When doing presentations] I used to misspell something... The professor would be like 'you misspelled something' to my face I just wanted to fall right there. You work so hard and put so much energy to be called out right in front of everybody. That was embarrassing, I don't know if they did it to help me or intentionally.

Javier started his college career at the local community college. At the time of his high school graduation, his grades were not satisfactory to enter a four year college. He transferred to a four year public institution after one semester, where the incident above occurred. Due to his feelings about being able to succeed academically there, he reached out to Martin. Martin invited him to visit his college and Javier transferred the next year.

He was able to successfully complete all the requirements for graduation and was applying for graduate school in social work at the time of our interview.

For students whose first language was not English, the fear of not being able to speak what was considered “good English” served as a reminder of their status as an outsider within the college environment. Teresa, who attended a four year public college and majored in political science, noted:

There are many challenges... Language is the first one, like sometimes when you are in class especially your English classes they expect a lot from you because they don't know where you come from they don't know you. They know you're not from here because of the way you look, maybe. My challenge was my English class, like I used to see everybody raising their hand and giving just good answers...in the beginning it was hard because you don't want to look stupid or you don't want [them] to see that you are lacking, you don't want them to see you as less than them.

Teresa, who is currently applying to Law school, would attend tutoring sessions and surround herself around people who “only spoke English” in order to practice her English. Most notably, she would vent to her Latin American Society Club members about her classroom experiences. Her peers encouraged her to be “less shy”, speak up during class, and to not be afraid to ask questions. It is worth to point out that Teresa, like Nael and Javier, attributed their negative experiences in the classroom to their personalities and/or traits such as lacking self-confidence, being shy and getting nervous.

Respondents were asked to discuss how they overcame challenges. Many of them used a familiar strategy for other ASP students which involves the concept of “being a family.”

For example, Julio remarked:

My main struggle was failing my papers in college. I struggled a lot writing my papers but I was disciplined. I wouldn't even look at my phone, watch TV or go on Facebook so doing that and going to the learning center I overcame that

struggle. I always thought about La Esperanza. I accomplished what I did because I wanted to do it for La Esperanza.

As a previous participant of ASP, Julio understood the importance of giving back to his community and “not leaving others behind.” Julio recognizes his weakness in writing papers, mentions what strategies he used in order to do better and then asserts that everything he had accomplished up to that point was for La Esperanza, the city that he cannot leave behind or forget. These concepts of working hard, not giving up, proving people wrong and ASP as family were very much part of the daily interaction and programming among ASP staff, faculty and students during the summers I observed.

Other strategies used to succeed in college included speaking to professors, visiting office hours, and seeking tutoring or extra help. Imani describes her process in deciding that she would not give up and return to her four year, highly selective college:

First semester was hardest thing ever. But then I adapted. It was more me the way I thought about it. Like, when I came back 2<sup>nd</sup> semester I was like think positive this is where I'm gonna be for the next 3.5 yrs... Tutoring, and looking for help. Definitely academics at school that helped... and mostly like, building relationships with professors coming to them after class.

These behaviors were similar to those displayed by participants who “were immersed in resource-rich, predominantly white, wealthy secondary schools” in Anthony Jack’s (2016:4) study on privileged poor. Though his study looks at a different academic space, the students in my study are similar in that they too came from low income families and were able to learn these expected behaviors in a place other than the home and school. My participants understood that in order to succeed they would need to speak up and advocate for themselves by accessing academic resources on campus and making connections with allies. This type of resistant cultural capital was rewarded and encouraged as part of ASP.

## Conclusion

This paper used students' stories to recognize the ways in which racism may affect first generation, immigrant students of color. By identifying the issues that students faced at different predominantly white institutions, I demonstrated that students had developed different forms of capital as part of the Academic Support Program. These forms of capital were used successfully to navigate academic institutions.

Students' reported experiencing microaggressions in their interactions with faculty and peers that not only shaped their sense of belonging at that particular campus, but also helped them to evaluate which type of capital to access. Creating counterspaces, like Latino/a organizations and other affinity groups, joining different organizations on campus and maintaining ASP networks were all examples of students mobilizing their social capital. Although the pressures of a new academic and social environment affected some, each managed to persist in college by using strategies they had used before. Defying expectations, proving people wrong and embracing La Esperanza are examples of resistant capital.

Understanding that failing and quitting was not an option because of family and their own expectations and responsibilities, students drew from aspirational and resistant cultural capital to practice and feel comfortable engaging in expected academic behaviors. Engaging in practices of the "privilege poor", such as meeting professors for office hours, asking questions during class, advocating for themselves and seeking tutoring served as a lifeline when faced with academic challenges.

Recently, a Latina student at a predominantly white university in the area was accused of plagiarizing for her use of the word "hence" and producing a well written

academic paper in one of her classes. She relied on social media to expose the hostility and humiliation that she had felt in the classroom. Similarly, the participants in this study also expressed feelings of inadequacy, low expectations on behalf of professors and peers and overall lack of confidence related to language. These findings help to shed light on the ways in which predominantly white colleges and universities can create a more inclusive environment for students of color and for non-native speakers. Creating and making “practice groups”, in which students can come together and practice their pronunciation and public speaking, available for students whose first language is not English may be a helpful strategy. Additionally, creating classrooms where students do not have to feel afraid regardless of their background is crucial. In order to accomplish this, universities will have to engage faculty to embrace the diversity in their student body and create a welcoming classroom environment.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

*“More importantly they taught me the importance of education. I think the most important skill that I learned from [ASP] was to not give up. [The director] and all of the ASP staff always drilled it in our heads that there was no quitting. No matter what, we were always expected to try our best.” (Imani-college graduate, social worker).*

Scholars have researched reasons why Latinos still lag behind their counterparts in regards to educational attainment. Focusing on deficit models has been a popular explanation used in much of the previous research. However, not much has been done to look at high achieving, low income, first-generation Latino/a students. In looking at alternative ways in which students have access to resources that can facilitate educational attainment, it is important to point out the role of academic support programs. My study used students’ experience within an academic support program in an economically distressed city in Massachusetts to better understand how students work through different challenges that may prevent them from attending, persisting and graduating college. Most importantly, their stories give us insight into the strengths, coping strategies and resistance mechanisms they have acquired in order to successfully navigate the educational system that is often hostile towards them, their families and their communities.

Academic Support Program is an afterschool program that offers tutoring, college and academic counseling and a small stipend for participants. It is competitive in that students are referred to the program by a teacher or a guidance counselor and then responsible for going through a time consuming application process. Applicants are asked to fill out an application, provide tax forms to verify their families are considered low income, and complete an interview with the staff. Applicants are selected based on their



academic promise, meaning academic achievement, and whether or not they are interested in committing to being part of a six week summer program. Even though when I began my observations the location was the basement of a community college, the program was well known among high achieving students at La Esperanza. Currently, they are housed in La Esperanza high school, where staff has more access to teachers and other resources.

In a city with high crime rates, low academic achievement and categorized by the state as an economically distressed area many students acknowledged feeling stigmatized. They described numerous negative interactions with teachers, school administrators, admissions representatives, potential employers and college peers. Even though some of those interactions gave way to doubt and lack of self-confidence, many of them embraced a sense of pride about being immigrants or children of immigrants and representing La Esperanza. My research describes how this process takes place.

This dissertation used Critical Race Theory, specifically a conceptual framework called Community Cultural Wealth, to guide my research question and to build on scholarship that seeks to give voice and validate the experience of oppressed communities. This framework informed decisions around how to analyze the data that I collected for three summers. It gave me the theoretical tools to shy away from deficit rhetoric often found in the literature and to expand on scholarship that is committed to social justice and community empowerment. Understanding the multiple ways in which communities of color create necessary forms of capital in order to resist and survive poverty, disenfranchisement, racism, discrimination and oppression is the most valuable lesson I have learned in conducting my research.

The overarching goal of this study was to better understand the strategies that Latino/a students use to academically succeed. In addition, I was interested in learning more about how and why students decide to attend a post-secondary institution and what skills they develop and use in order to persist and graduate from college. I initially interviewed ten Latino/a students who were seniors at a large, research university in Massachusetts. Eight out of those ten students indicated that they had participated either one of two popular college readiness programs in the state. I began to solicit the opportunity to volunteer in exchange for support in getting interviews with students. Academic Support Program in La Esperanza, which is one of the two popular college readiness programs, gave me the opportunity to volunteer, teach, mentor, provide feedback and become familiar with the staff and the students. Even though I did my participant observations and interviews during my first three summers there, having been part of the program for seven summers, I have now become part of their family. I have witnessed the change in leadership, the struggles with funding cycles, and the tragedies that some of the students have lived through. It has truly been a learning opportunity.

To that end, I organized my dissertation into three separate papers. Each paper presented different forms of capital related to the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework. Findings were categorized and presented based on the components of CCW which I discussed in each paper. My first paper focused on *resistant* and *social capital* and looked at ways in which ASP facilitated counterspaces and opportunities for students to rely on each other. Two themes evolved out of the data: *Proving People Wrong* and *Friends as Support*. My findings expanded current literature on oppositional behavior, academic achievement and first generation students by including how students can learn

what some may consider “productive” oppositional behavior and how and in what social contexts they decide to engage in that behavior. I discussed ways in which ASP is involved in helping students make sense of microaggressions and discrimination by providing the strategy of “proving people wrong.”

Additionally, I presented ASP as a *social and academic counterspace* where students are taught the importance of networking and relying on their peers for academic and emotional support. Students were encouraged to work together, often segregated by grade and class level (i.e. Advance Placement, Honors). This provided opportunities for students to exchange different strategies and skills, such as how to study for different subjects and how to interact with specific teachers. As I show in paper three, the skills learned at this stage were crucial in preparing students for success in college.

The second paper presented evidence for how familial and aspirational capital was used by students. I focused on three themes derived from the data: “better future”, “pa’ que te mantengas” and “family first.” I showed how parents verbalize academic expectations, how they motivate students to succeed and revealed that this may lead to different interpretations depending on the students’ gender. For example, mothers’ scolding, advice and storytelling not only encouraged the girls to delay serious romantic relationships but also to see themselves as independent. Their career and academic goals were motivated by the idea that they would not depend on a man.

Although ASP did not have a strong influence in regards to how parents passed on their expectations, they did educate parents on the benefits of higher education and encourage a partnership that would ultimately lead to the students’ success. The program

director was well respected and trusted within the community and this alleviated many of the fears that parents had regarding their children living on a college campus for six weeks. ASP also did programming for parents, such as financial aid nights and dinner banquets. These events provided parents the opportunity to come together and discuss students' academic plans with people that they actually trusted. Moreover, social events for parents also gave way to important exchanges of "things you should know" like, deadlines for filing taxes and how to get help with filling out FAFSA forms in Spanish.

The aim of the third and final paper was to look at different forms of capital that students had accumulated and see whether they had benefitted during college and after graduating. Specifically, I presented data that reinforced the need for social networks during college. The majority of students had at one point or another faced discrimination in the classroom and in other public spaces within their predominantly white campuses. Participants recounted negative interactions with faculty, staff and their peers mostly stemming from language proficiency and their city of origin. These findings help to expose not only what seems to be the "unspoken" struggles that students face in classrooms, but also the ways in which institutional racism is embedded in higher education. The majority of my participants did not identify these instances as examples of racism nor discrimination, but rather as challenges or as motivators to succeed.

Students relied on other students of color in order to survive hostile environments. They activated their social capital by recognizing networks and counterspaces in order to seek academic and social support. If those networks were not present, they sought them out at nearby schools and back at home. Others began their own Latino/a clubs and organizations on campus. These networks were crucial in securing their own success.

Back at La Esperanza, ASP also took an active role in securing and expanding these networks by hosting alumni events such as their annual Thanksgiving banquet, career panel and alumni banquet. These events led to two ASP alumni to form a Young Professional network in the city of La Esperanza. They are present on social media and I am invited to attend their gatherings from time to time.

The participants in this study were what I called “academically advantaged” in that they were part of ASP. Being a member of ASP allowed them to access many rewards and resources that other students could not even imagine (i.e., college fairs, college overnight programs, college visits, one on one interviews with admissions counselors, etc). The organization and the staff are well respected within the community and well known in La Esperanza high school. If you are part of ASP, teachers and other staff know that you are well taken care of. The benefits of being part of this program comes with responsibility. Students are expected to be accountable to themselves and the program. For example, doing well academically, showing up to tutoring and other planned activities and behaving according to the rules established by the school, in other words remaining focused on academics and staying out of trouble.

Participants’ advantage by way of knowledge about the college process, access to networks and financial resources helped to shed light to the various ways in which the majority of students at La Esperanza experience the effects of educational inequality. While my study highlights how much impact academic and social counterspaces can have on this segment of students, it is also important to note that these opportunities have been layered and built on by teachers, staff, counselors and administrators for years. As an example of tracking within schools, it is no surprise that those students who exhibit

behaviors that are valued and/or desired are the ones who get the most opportunities. Advisors, guidance counselors and teachers are in a position to recognize those behaviors whether inside or outside the classroom. Although the majority of my students exhibited positive academic behaviors, some of the new immigrant students in the program were able to pick up on social cues from their peers.

The present study shows evidence that with the appropriate support, students can learn to adapt and incorporate desired academic behaviors. More research is needed on the processes through which these academic behaviors are rewarded in classrooms, who gets rewarded and how students learn to use those behaviors to their benefit. Also, more research is needed to look at the ways in which gender directly affects how students learn to “be a good student.” More importantly, future research should pay attention to ways in which educators can incorporate and value ways of teaching that allows for different students to focus on the strengths and lived experiences they bring to the classroom.

The data showed that being labeled a good student and achieving academic success while in high school and in college are more than motivators for attending a competitive post-secondary institutions, they are forms of resistance. Students recounted numerous microaggressions they had experienced from adults within the high school environment and also at higher educational institutions. Results show the ways in which students learned strategies to deal with these negative interactions, and how they were able turn those messages around. This is important because this type of strategy learning and development took place mainly at ASP, a community after school program and not in other environments. Further research should look at these resistance strategies to see whether girls practice them differently than boys.

While all students lived with at least one parent and could identify at least one adult at school who had helped them, they became socially aware about certain disadvantages they may face in college while being part of ASP. The majority could remember a conversation, workshop or discussion that occurred at ASP, which led them to be more socially aware. This is a strength of the program, since it allows for older students and other adults to speak openly and honestly about difficult challenges while in college.

Current literature explores how gendered familism can impact college pathways for Latino/a students (Ovink 2014). The results presented here expand on previous findings concerning the role of family specifically on academic and career aspirations. For the segment of students in this study, the way in which they experienced familism included their parents and extended family's immigrant stories. Although the message of financial obligation to parents was the same for girls and boys, girls were encouraged to not depend on men. Further research would be needed to explore whether young women held off on engaging in serious relationships while in college and if so, whether they believe that helped them achieve their goal.

Additionally, more research is needed to explore the impact that gendered practices within afterschool, community and academic programs have on students. For example, if the constant message is for girls to stay away from boys in order to succeed academically-what are the repercussions for young men? What is that message perpetuating? What are the consequences of influencing negative perceptions towards the boys?

While this research has presented evidence that after school programs can be structured to help underserved students of color succeed, it is important to also mention limitations. First, the students who were part of this study were all permanent residents, at minimum and did not have to worry about immigration status. Therefore, this study presents challenges that are specific to legal residents and citizens of the United States. None of my students disclosed the immigration status of their parent(s). I consider this a limitation because of the burden that a large segment of Latino/a students currently face due to liminal legality.

Another limitation was the disproportion of boys versus girls within the program. The majority of the participants were girls, and thus oversampling of boys had to be used in order to get their stories. This was an issue at all levels, meaning that there were more girls enrolled in the afterschool program, summer program and employed as college mentors. As mentioned earlier, this may be in result to the amount of access that students had to academic opportunities based on “acceptable” behavior in classrooms. Nevertheless, all students were passionate and invested in obtaining a higher education to achieve upward social mobility. They shared their goals, dreams and aspirations to “make it” and to help their families. Each of them desired to return to their community and show others that they too could make it. Allowing Latino/a students to share their stories and have their voices heard is a form of empowerment that they can carry with them throughout their educational journey.



**APPENDIX A**  
**CONSENT FOR VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**  
Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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**Student Researcher:** Patricia Sánchez-Connally  
**Study Title:** Factors Influencing College Attendance Among Latino/a Students

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**1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?**

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research study.

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

**2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a current participant of [ASP] and have identified yourself as a Latino student.

**3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

The main purpose of this research study is to investigate what factors motivate Latino students to pursue a higher education. The study is also interested in learning about the challenges that Latino students face and how academic support groups help students.

**4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?**

This study will be conducted at [ASP]. Participation in this study will take 30-45 minutes. You will not be contacted in the future.

**5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a few questions regarding your educational motivations, goals and background such as “Why is higher education important to you?” This study involves the use of audio taping your interview with the researcher. Neither

your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audiotape or the transcript. The tapes will be transcribed and erased after the study has been completed.

#### **6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may enhance our knowledge about the Latino student population.

#### **7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

There is minimal risk to you in this study. You may experience some discomfort while being asked some personal questions. Please note that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that you may terminate participation at any time without consequence. You also have the right to ask questions about this research before you sign this form and at any time during the interview. If you wish to terminate participation, you should let the researcher know by contacting her directly. There will be no penalty if you decide to stop the interview or to not participate at all.

#### **8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records and, if applicable, of audio or videotapes. The researchers will keep all study records (including any codes to your data) in a secure location (locking file cabinet as an example). Research records will be labeled with a code. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed 3 years after. All electronic files (e.g., database, spreadsheet, etc.) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

#### **9. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the student researcher Patricia Sánchez-Connally. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or [humansubjects@ora.umass.edu](mailto:humansubjects@ora.umass.edu).

#### **11. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

**12. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?**

The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but the study personnel will assist you in getting treatment.

**13. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. The general purposes and particulars of the study as well as possible hazards and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature:                      Print Name:                      Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature (if under 18):                      Print Name:                      Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher                      Print Name:                      Date:

# Formulario de Consentimiento para Participación en Estudio de Investigación

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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**Nombre del estudiante:** Patricia Sánchez-Connally  
**Investigación:** Factors Influencing College Attendance Among Latino/a Students (Factores que Influyen la Asistencia Universitaria entre Estudiantes Latinos)

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## 1. ¿QUE ES ESTE FORMULARIO?

Este formulario es para proporcionarle información acerca de esta investigación para que usted pueda decidir de su participación en este estudio.

Este formulario le dará la información que usted necesita para entender la razón por la cual se realiza el estudio y el por qué usted ha sido invitado/a a participar. También le informara lo que necesita para participar y si existe algún riesgo o inconveniencias por su participación. Le pedimos que por favor lea este formulario y que tome tiempo para hacer cualquier pregunta que tenga. Si decide participar, puede firmar este formulario y mantener una copia para sus archivos.

## 2. ¿QUIEN PUEDE PARTICIPAR?

Usted ha sido invitado/a a participar porque es parte del program [ASP] y se ha identificado como Latino/a.

## 3. ¿CUAL ES EL PROPOSITO DE ESTA INVESTIGACION?

El propósito de este estudio es para aprender más acerca de los obstáculos que los estudiantes Latinos tienen al aplicar para la universidad y como programas académicos (como ASP) los apoya. La información será usada para informar un estudio acerca de los factores que influyen la asistencia de estudiantes Latinos (viviendo en el área de Boston) a universidades en Massachusetts.

## 4. ¿DONDE SERA EL ESTUDIO Y POR CUANTO TIEMPO?

Este estudio será conducido en [ASP]. Su participación en este estudio le tomará 30-45 minutos.

## **5. ¿QUE TENDRE QUE HACER?**

Si usted decide participar en el estudio, la investigadora le hará unas preguntas acerca de su experiencia en el sistema secundario, sus expectativas académicas y su participación en el programa [ASP]. Este estudio incluye el uso de audio-grabación. Ninguna de su información personal como su nombre será asociada con su entrevista o su grabación. La grabación será transcrita y borrada después que concluya el estudio.

## **6. ¿CUAL SON MIS BENEFICIOS DE PARTICIPAR EN ESTE ESTUDIO?**

Usted no será directamente beneficiada por participar en esta investigación. Sin embargo, espero que su participación me ayude a comprender más acerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes en programas de apoyo académico.

## **7. ¿CUALES SON LOS RIESGOS DE PARTICIPACION?**

Los riesgos de participación son mínimos. Usted puede experimentar alguna incomodidad al ser preguntado/a algunas preguntas que puede encontrar personales. Por favor recuerde que su participación es voluntaria y puede terminar la entrevista en cualquier momento sin ninguna consecuencia. Usted también tiene el derecho de hacer preguntas acerca de la investigación antes de firmar el formulario y durante la entrevista. Si desea terminar su participación por favor contacte a la investigadora directamente. No habrá ninguna penalización si decide terminar la entrevista o no participar.

## **8. ¿COMO SERA PROTEGIDA MI INFORMACION PERSONAL?**

Los siguientes procedimientos serán tomados para proteger su identidad y su audio grabación. La investigadora mantendrá todo la información (incluyendo la grabación, y códigos de datos) en una localidad segura (archivo con llave). Todos los archivos electrónicos serán protegidos con contraseñas. Cualquier computadora usada también será protegida por una contraseña. Solo la investigadora y cualquier otro personal trabajando en el estudio tendrán acceso a la contraseña. Al final de este estudio, la investigadora podrá publicar los resultados. La información podrá ser presentada y usted no será identificada/o en ninguna publicación ni presentación.

## **9. ¿QUE HAGO SI TENGO PREGUNTAS?**

Tome su tiempo antes de hacer su decisión. Estaré disponible a responder cualquier pregunta que tenga sobre este estudio. Si tiene más preguntas sobre el proyecto o si tiene algún problema relacionado con esta investigación puede contactar a Patricia Sánchez-Connally psanchez@soc.umass.edu. Si tiene preguntas sobre sus derechos como participante puede contactar a la University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 o humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

**11. ¿PUEDO SUSPENDER MI PARTICIPACION?**

No tiene que participar en este estudio si no desea hacerlo. Si participa en este estudio, y se arrepiente después, puede suspender el uso de su entrevista. No hay ninguna penalización o consecuencia si decide no participar.

**12. ¿QUE PASA SI SOY LESIONADO?**

La Universidad de Massachusetts-Amherst no tiene ningún programa para compensar a ningún participante por cualquier complicación relacionada con investigaciones.

**13. DECLARACION DE CONSENTIMIENTO VOLUNTARIO**

He leído este formulario y decidido participar en el proyecto. El propósito general del estudio y los riesgos potenciales de mi participación han sido explicados. Comprendo que puedo suspender mi participación en cualquier momento.

_____	_____	_____
Firma del participante	Nombre	Fecha

_____	_____	_____
Firma del padre/madre (si menor de 18)	Nombre	Fecha

Al firmar, indico que la/el participante ha leído y comprende los detalles en este documento, y ha sido dado una copia.

_____	_____	_____
Firma de investigadora	Nombre	Fecha

**APPENDIX B**  
**GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS**

1) Tell me a little bit about yourself.  
**Follow up:** What country is your family from? Were you born there or in the US? *If born there:* how old were you when you came to US? *If born here,* when did your parents emigrate? Do you have a lot of family in your native country? How about here? Are you the first in your family to attend college? Do you have family members back in your country with college degrees?

2) Tell me a little bit about your high school experience. Where did you go to high school? How about junior high school? Did your town have more than one? Did all the kids in jr high end up at the high school?

3) Could you share with me whether you think college is important? If so, why? Give examples. If no, why not? Give examples.

**Follow up with:** Tell me whether you have a specific career in mind? If so, what is it? If no, what do you see yourself doing after college?

4) Tell me whether you think higher education is important to your parents/family. If so, how? Give examples. What do your parents and family think about college? Do they view it as important, useful (here in US and in native country)? How about your friends?

5) How did you decide to attend college? \*If college student\* Could you tell me whether you received any help during the college application process? If so, give examples

6) How involved is your family in your college decision making process? Can you give me some examples? Who is the most involved?

7) Please tell me about what or who motivates you academically. How?

8) Please tell me what your challenges are as a Latin@ student trying to attend college?

**Follow up with:** How have you overcome those challenges? Examples. Who has helped you overcome those challenges? What are some of the characteristics/qualities of this person that you think are helpful to you? (probe for description of mentor)

- 9) Tell me how you learned about (academic support group) and how you got involved? Follow up with: How do you think belonging to (academic support group) has helped you? Give examples. What are some skills you have learned in the program?



## APPENDIX C

### GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR FOLLOW UP INTERVIEWS

- 1) Tell me about what you're up to these days? (When did you graduate? Did you graduate from the institution where you first enrolled out of high school? What was your major? Are you employed? If so, where, what do you do?)
- 2) Please share your career plans. Where do you see yourself in five years?
- 3) Tell me about some of the challenges you encountered while in college? How did you overcome those challenges? Did you belong to groups/organizations? Which ones? (access resources like mentoring, tutoring, extra help get \*examples\*) Who has helped you overcome those challenges? What are some of the characteristics/qualities of this person that you think are helpful to you? (probe for description of mentor)
- 4) If employed, tell me about some challenges that you have encountered in the workplace. How do you deal with those challenges?
- 5) Tell me about your involvement with ASP while in college. How about now? What do you see as beneficial to you being part of ASP? What are some skills you learned in ASP which you believe have been useful to you? \*examples\*

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