CROSSING BORDERS: THE PERSISTENCE OF FIRST GENERATION LATINOS IN THE POSTSECONDARY PIPELINE

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the six students who shared with me their stories, tears, laughter, and hopes. I am humbled and privileged to know each of you. It is especially dedicated to Flavio, who is a beautiful reminder that anything is possible if you work hard, dream harder, and believe.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Crossing Borders: The Persistence of First Generation Latinos in the Postsecondary Pipeline
by
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The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of postsecondary persistence among first-generation college students of Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican-American or of other Latino origin (self-identified) who attended community college as part of their undergraduate collegiate experience. In particular, where they encountered support in attending college and who or what influenced them to pursue higher education at the university level. Along with this support, I explore how cultural and social capital mediated their persistence in transferring from a community college to a four-year university. Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of cultural and social capital were used as the overarching theoretical framework as scholars have argued that first generation college attendees are at risk for successful completion because they lack familial knowledge of the college experience. The research design invoked the qualitative methodology of one on one interviews that were then analyzed for trends as well as unique phenomena. I interviewed six subjects willing to share personal information (kept confidential by pseudonym), on topics such as: personal and familial ethnic and scholastic history; messages, ideas and examples received in the home regarding education, work and money; relationships with community college personnel and potential transfer agents; as well as perceptions for the overall reasons for their academic persistence. The intended benefits of this study include an increased understanding of Latino students’ sources of support, successes, and their methods of overcoming obstacles. As the Latino population grows in the United States, there is a need to understand how we might better serve this population and augment their rates of baccalaureate attainment. This research may aid students and educators interested in the unique, everyday experiences of successful Latino undergraduates in the postsecondary pipeline.

Keywords: Latino, college students, social capital, community college, transfer, persistence
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, community colleges became the primary post-secondary educational access point for Latino\(^1\) students in the United States; fifty years later, community colleges remain not only the primary access point, but for many Latinos, also the highest point in higher education. In California, Latinos make up the largest minority group in community college enrollment, with their numbers increasing annually. Although higher Latino enrollment in local, affordable community colleges may sound like a hopeful statistic, further research proves that Latino reliance on these open-door institutions has produced side effects and obstacles to student retention and eventual transfer to four-year institutions. In simpler terms: Latinos, both native and immigrant, are the most likely group to go to a community college and no further. In fact, while more than half of Latino students are found in community colleges, it is estimated that no more than eight percent of these students will actually go on to complete a B.A. (Gándara & Chávez, 2003) despite current data that indicates that most Latino students enter community colleges with the ultimate goal of transferring to a four-year institution (Cohen, Brawer, & Bensimon, 1985; Richardson & Bender, 1987). This is a devastating fact for Latinos and for all of us as post-secondary Latino attrition rates have long-term societal and generational effects. Latinos continue to comprise the largest minority group in the United States. The attainment of a baccalaureate degree has direct correlations to social mobility and educating our largest minority group is essential to the socio-economic success of the nation. Only one in ten Latinos has a college degree, compared to more than one in four white Americans and more than one in three Asians (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). In 2010, Latinos comprised 16.3 percent of the total

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\(^1\) I do not like the use of umbrella terminology such as “Hispanic” and “Latino” as they homogenize groups and neglect variations. However, there is no ethnic label that is unanimously regarded as the most appropriate or correct. For the purpose of this study, I will use “Latino” as the standardized term to refer to all Latin American origins but this is not meant to imply that there is not gender, class, linguistic, racial, and ethnic distinctions under this label.
national U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of these 50.5 million Latinos in the United States in 2010, only 3.3 million have a college degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). If Latinos did not make up such an overwhelming majority of the United States, these statistics might be considered inconsequential. However, 2010 U.S. Census Data confirms Latinos accounted for 56 percent of the population growth in the past decade and these startling numbers of low educational attainment represent dire consequences not only for our fastest growing population but also for our nation as a whole. Think tanks, policymakers and researchers have given much attention to the educational underrepresentation of Latinos since the 1970s. Despite this attention, Latinos are no more likely to succeed in a four-year institution than they were fifty years ago. The need to re-evaluate current investigatory practices and to discover ways in which this cycle can be stopped is paramount to Latinos and to all of us.

**PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

Latino attrition rates have been a focus of study since the 1970s and identifying and analyzing why Latinos fail makes up the majority of the literature on the subject (Tierney, 1992; Verdugo, 1986). This long-term research literature has produced data on the many risk factors most often associated with Latinos, including limited English proficiency, poverty, failure to establish a cultural context, low parent and teacher expectations, and institutional practices that often track Latinos into segregated schools with poor resources and instruction (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). The problem with this kind of research is that it reinforces an idea that Latinos are doomed to fail and offers little solution on how students might overcome these obstacles. However, a small percentage of Latino students do succeed to a baccalaureate degree and recent theory and studies highlighting Latino academic resilience and persistence are burgeoning (eg. Crisp & Nora, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Rendon & Valadez, 1993; Trueba, 2002). My work supports this recent paradigmatic shift and reflects my belief that merely naming why students fail is not enough; we must look at persistence holistically. By moving past the cultural, academic, linguistic, financial, institutional and social barriers, we begin to understand why some students do persist to a baccalaureate degree despite these obstacles. This study examines the academic persistence of Latino undergraduate students who have successfully overcome the odds to transfer from a
community college and are nearing completion or have completed a bachelor’s degree. The data is collected qualitatively and retains the voice and specific insight that, despite the small number of interviewees, can aid researchers in focusing on the specific ways in which this group has persevered. The data demonstrates that placing the blame on Latinos themselves through references to cultural and other structural limitations is not productive. Instead, we should view our bilingual, bi-cultural students in a light that recognizes their persistence derived from their own experiences.

**GOALS OF THIS STUDY**

The goal of this thesis is tri-fold: First, to provide a literature review that moves away from the traditional, ubiquitous deficit-based model of Latino student research that tends to blame the individual and links risk factors with low economic achievement. Instead, this work aims to move toward the more comprehensive investigations of Latino students, which offer an exploration of the influence of self-beliefs, perceptions, social interactions, supports, and cultural influences in environmental contexts (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on cultural and social capital and habitus, which demonstrate how knowledge is socially reproduced or learned through families and neighborhoods and that this knowledge is a means of appropriation for success, provided the framework for interpreting the interviews aimed at understanding why some students persist. The second goal was to locate and interview Latino students who transferred from a community college to a four-year institution and are nearing graduation or have graduated. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to use qualitative interview data to understand how some Latino students make sense of the fact that they have overcome overwhelming obstacles to obtain a baccalaureate degree when the majority of their family and peers have not been able to do so.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

As noted earlier, Latinos are the most likely group to go to a two-year community college and no further. The majority of research on the subject contends that “at risk” factors contribute to the underrepresentation of Latinos in postsecondary education. However, few scholars have explicitly focused on how Latino college students have made sense of their collegiate experiences (Vázquez, 2004). Recent research reveals that much might be learned from those who have overcome obstacles to achieve academic success. This thesis seeks to
use theory, recent empirical investigation and original qualitative interview data to understand what has been termed “academic invulnerability” (Arellano & Padilla, 1996) in Latino undergraduate students who have transferred from a community college and are nearing or who have completed a baccalaureate degree. I will use an interview methodology to hear from the students themselves on how they understand and interpret their own success. Ultimately, I seek to understand how these students make sense of their success and identify the theories and research that might help explain their postsecondary persistence.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCHER AND A PERSONAL NOTE ON IDENTITY POLITICS

Some may challenge that a young, educated, single, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman from the United States has little business conducting research on Latino students as I can never understand their perspectives or walk in their shoes. I initiated this research out of personal concern that my Latino counterparts may be being systematically denied an education beyond the community college level and access to upward mobility and to try to understand why some do reach their dreams so that others can follow. There is no question that my identity markers put me at an inescapable perceived position of power over groups long dominated by those of similar identities. However, we cannot hide from our own narratives. I currently work in higher education and my professional goals include the opportunity to work directly with students at the postsecondary level in achieving their goals. I seek to know as much as possible about the minority groups with whom I hope to be working. It is my hope that this research promotes further discourse on the issue of minority student resilience. It is my opinion that doing cross-cultural work is more important than the limitations of my immutable characteristics. Understanding and valuing those who are different from us is the first step toward progressive pedagogy, and allowing them to be heard through their own words is the second.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges are touted as open door institutions and are founded on the ideal of equal opportunity for all (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). Access to information about college and university systems is important in both the transfer of community college students to a four-year institution and the persistence of all students. First-generation Latinos who are the first in their families to go to college do not typically have access to information about universities the way other students whose families have attended a university would. However, a few first-generation Latinos do transfer and persist and little is known about where and how they gain access to information and resources necessary for their postsecondary success. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature and understand why some first-generation Latinos do transfer and persist to a baccalaureate despite their lack of knowledge or cultural capital. Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital, which state that there is value in networks that are linked to socially valued resources (Bourdieu, 1986), is discussed here as it was used as the overarching framework.

POINTS IN THE PIPELINE

There are three major hurdles to cross in the postsecondary pipeline when a person begins at the community college. The three hurdles include the pre-transfer agreement at the community college level, successful transfer to a four-year institution, and successful integration at the four-year institution. The majority of students do not make it past the first two points. In fact, Latinos have the highest drop out rates of any major ethnic group in the United States (Pachon, Tornatzky, & Torres, 2003). However, a progressive literature review that examines research of those who do cross these perilous academic borders may help us understand where and how some Latinos make progress in the pipeline.

There are two ways to get to a four-year university. The first is to enter following one’s high school graduation. The second is to transfer after completing lower division courses at a community college. Most Latinos do not transfer immediately from high school
to a four-year university (U.S. Department of Education: National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) and approximately 56 percent of Latinos in higher education are enrolled in community colleges (Harvey, 2002); it is evident that our focus ought to be on what is occurring at these two-year institutions. In fact, of the 50 percent of Latinos who graduated with their high school class in 2005, only 54 percent of those went on to college, compared to 73 percent of white students. Of those 54 percent of Latinos who went on to college after high school, the majority enrolled in a two-year institution. That same year, only 7 percent of bachelor degrees were awarded to Latinos (as cited in Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 196).

Community colleges are attractive to minority and working class students because they provide proximity to students’ homes, low tuition rates, few enrollment requirements, and a wider variety of class times, many in the evenings (Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2003). Among the general population, 90 percent of students who enroll at a community college state that they intend to obtain a degree or certificate to transfer to a four-year institution (Crisp & Nora, 2010), yet only between five and twenty-five percent are believed to successfully transfer to a university and/or obtain a bachelor’s degree (Rendon & Valadez, 1993). Thus, community colleges are the most common starting and stopping point for Latinos in the postsecondary pipeline. But what are the characteristics of those few who do successfully navigate community college to get to a four-year university? It is here that I focus the rest of this literature review.

**NOTABLE RESEARCH**

A number of postsecondary attrition and retention studies (eg. Kraemer, 1995; Nora, 1987; Nora & Rendon, 1990) are based upon Vincent Tinto’s 1987 seminal work, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. In this study, Tinto provides a model of student departure based upon Durkheim’s famous 1951 theory *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Tinto’s (1987) study was significant in that it urged others to stop blaming college attrition on poor academic achievement. “Less than 15 percent of all institutional departures on the national average take the form of academic dismissal,” he observed (p. 53). Instead of focusing on poor academic achievement, Tinto’s model begins by observing how a student’s family and community background affect their initial attitudes, intentions, and commitments toward their education. He cites personal attributes, values, academic and social skills, and
pre-college educational skills as major reasons for one’s academic outcomes (Tinto, 1987, pp. 35-85). However, more than these factors, his study gives much weight to the formal and informal institutional experiences a student may encounter, both academically and socially. These experiences are important as they may or may not result in what he terms integration. Integration takes two forms, social and academic. Social integration occurs by participating in extracurricular activities while academic integration occurs when the student is a member of a community that benefits their scholastic performance. According to Tinto, both social and academic integration are important as they reaffirm and reformulate the student’s intentions and commitments toward college. His study concludes that at least some degree of academic and social integration is required to promote persistence and avoid departure. Tinto reminds us that in addition to expanding opportunities for personal growth and leadership activities, integration also helps students expand their peer and mentor networks and become more engaged in school, which likely fosters positive educational outcomes. He also recognizes the role of the institution as an important factor influencing student retention.

Although Tinto’s work has long been criticized for not being relevant to minority students (e.g., Tierney, 1992), and applying only to traditional college-going students, Tinto’s study is used as a theoretical framework for the few studies on persistent and transfer-ready Latino community college students. Amaury Nora is a leading researcher on factors impacting Latino postsecondary persistence. His influential 1987 study surveyed 227 Latino community college students in Texas to examine the direct and indirect effects of academic and social integration, student background, initial intent, and institutional commitments on retention by the community colleges. His research found that initial intent and commitments have a direct effect on both student integration and retention.

In a significant 1990 study where Nora collaborated with Rendon, “Determinants of predisposition to transfer among community college students: A structural model,” Nora and Rendon (1990) examined traditional-age Latino and White community college students’ in six institutions in Texas, Arizona, and California. Specifically, their study examined the relationships among five constructs: (1) student background factors, (2) initial commitments, (3) social integration, (4) academic integration, and (5) predisposition to transfer from the community college to a four-year institution. They found that all five of these factors were important in student transfer and together explained 65 percent of the variance in
predisposition to transfer. Their study also found that the majority of students did not take advantage of institutional opportunities for social and academic integration, such as academic counseling, meeting with transfer recruiters, or asking faculty and staff for transfer advice. Nora and Rendon concluded that this lack of integration has a greater affect on Latinos than Whites as Latinos have parents with lower levels of education and Latinos exhibit lower levels of transfer behavior. The study supported Tinto's model (1987) in finding that students with high levels of social and academic integration tended to have high levels of predisposition toward transfer and that integration, not ethnicity, correlates with predisposition to transfer. Nora and Rendon (1990) recommend better collegiate programs, counseling, resources for students to carry out academic work, and advice and advocacy networks as key ingredients for student success.

In a 1993 follow up study, Rendon worked with Valadez to produce an analysis of community college culture by interviewing students, faculty and administrators in six southwestern community colleges. Specifically, they wanted to examine, “What is done, how it is done at the institution, and who is involved in doing it,” (p. 28.) Their qualitative study assessed the attitudes of college administrators, staff, and faculty with regard to student achievement and transfer to four-year institutions. Their research yielded five major themes that focused on the factors influencing the transfer of community college students to four-year universities. These five themes were: importance of the family (how students’ parents felt about postsecondary persistence); economic considerations (whether immediate financial gain takes precedence over long-term educational goals); knowledge of the system (families may not have institutional knowledge and the community college counseling centers may be too understaffed to assist students); cultural understanding (potential lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of administration); and relationships with feeder schools (communication between the community college and universities). Rendon and Valadez (1993) conclude that attention to these five themes on the part of administrators may enhance student flow from two- to four-year colleges.

Kraemer, in her 1995 study, tested Tinto’s model (1987) by surveying nearly 700 older Latino community college students and found that intent to transfer had the greatest impact on transfer behavior. She recommends transfer center activities, alumni mentoring and career counseling for community college freshmen and suggests that early community
college outreach may awaken students’ interest in transferring to a four-year university. Her work also warns that there is still very little research related to community college retention, graduation and transfer and urges others to focus their scholastic attention on this underserved population.

Like Kraemer, Stanton-Salazar (2001) also recommends institutional support for students, specifically from institutional agents who have the opportunity to play a major role in supporting transfer. Stanton-Salazar cites six potential ways institutional agents can support students:

1. Funds of knowledge: helping students understand how university systems work, providing resources, etc.
2. Bridging: acting as a human bridge for students to cross over to new opportunities
3. Advocacy: working on behalf of the student and their interests
4. Role modeling: serving as a model of someone who has worked in and experienced various academic domains
5. Emotional and moral support
6. Personalized feedback, advice, and guidance (p. 268)

Bensimon and Dowd echo Stanton-Salazar’s recommendations in their 2009 study “Dimensions of the Transfer Choice Gap: Experiences of Latina and Latino Students Who Navigated Transfer Pathways”. In this work, Bensimon and Dowd (2009) reflect the voices of six Latino students who successfully navigated transfer pathways by transferring from a community college to a four-year university. However, while five of the six students were eligible to transfer to a school within the prestigious University of California system, none of them exercised that choice and five out of six instead opted for less selective universities. Their study examines the phenomena they title “the transfer choice gap”, which refers to students who are academically eligible to transfer to a selective four-year institution but instead choose less prestigious schools. They seek to explore potential causes for this gap in Latino transfer to elite institutions and to understand the important role of community college counselors and instructors in addressing this gap with students.

Bensimon and Dowd (2009) cite community college counselors and instructors as essential in validating students' aspirations to transfer from a community college to a selective university, a process they term "crossing the border" between two very different worlds and cultures (p. 637). This border crossing, they say, requires a deep-seated identity
transformation requiring support from authority figures. These authority figures, called “transfer agents”, act on behalf of students who use all the resources at their disposal to help students navigate bureaucracies, develop a sense of belonging in college, and overcome barriers to their educational progress (p. 651). The students they interviewed all had aspirations and hopes coming into the community college system, but Bensimon and Dowd conclude that these students would not have successfully transferred had they not had a transfer agent providing guidance, support, active involvement, and instilling a sense of confidence in students. This confidence instilled in students gives them permission to assume the identity of an ‘elite’, whereas students from affluent backgrounds assume their status as elites as a natural expression of their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986), or socially learned and internalized behaviors, dispositions, skills and abilities. Bensimon and Dowd (2009) describe this elite status as an unconscious perspective wherein individuals expect they have the opportunity and maybe even the entitlement to ask questions, receive counseling, and benefit from financial aid and other opportunities that make higher education possible. Without transfer agents, Bensimon and Dowd (2009) conclude that assuming this elite identity is highly unlikely for Latinos.

But where do Latinos find these transfer agents? Bensimon and Dowd (2009), who claim that the opportunities to benefit from the guidance of a transfer agent appear to be the result of luck, or serendipity, do not really answer the question. The successful transfer students from their study seemed to be in the right place at the right time when they met and benefitted from a transfer agent who played a pivotal role in their lives. They suspect that there are thousands of Latinos who were not lucky enough to have encountered a transfer agent who gave them the permission and confidence to move forward in their academic careers. Their study recommends postsecondary institutions develop highly effective “expert transfer agents” to increase transfer statistics of minority students. Transfer agents, they say, are far more effective than detailed articulation policies, fancy web-based transfer software, and transfer agreements because many of the students in their study remembered not knowing how to access this information prior to guidance from their transfer agent. Bensimon and Dowd (2009) urge community college administrators to train their professionals to provide students with the mentorship and advocacy tools needed to facilitate students’ experiences of transfer.
CONCLUSION

Research on postsecondary persistence at the community college level is scarce. This literature review highlights the few studies conducted on postsecondary persistence via two-year institutions and reminds us that improving Latino community college transfer is critical to fostering social mobility among the fastest growing population in the United States. While much research examines the barriers Latinos face, it is important to move our efforts toward the strategies employed by families, the community college faculty and staff, and the students themselves in gaining access to the information necessary for successful transfer and eventual graduation. There is still much to be learned about how community colleges might clear the pipeline for Latino transfer and an eventual baccalaureate and some of the answers may lie in initiating more conversations with the persistent students themselves.
CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Much of the literature on minority attrition and persistence focuses on the many obstacles students face and then cites these barriers as symptoms of social reproduction. Social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) states that schools and other institutions are not places of equal opportunity and instead act as machines perpetuating social inequalities. Minorities are often victims of social reproduction as they lack the knowledge and resources necessary for upward mobility, thus keeping them marginalized. This thesis seeks to examine the social mobility as opposed to the social reproduction of the few students that do persist, so that we may begin to understand where academically persistent Latinos acquire the information, resources, and skills necessary to succeed.

BOURDIEU

Bourdieu (1986) proposes a model of the functioning and structure of the social world based on the idea of social reproduction. In this model, Bourdieu questions how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce across generations without powerful resistance and without some kind of conscious recognition on the part of its members (Swartz, 1997). In his 1986 model, Bourdieu illustrates that we are all products of previous generations, unconsciously acquired traits and ideas, and an accumulation of time wherein each moment depends on countless previous moments. One’s social status depends on these factors and they may act as either a constraint or a catalyst to social success. This status holds a long-term immutability, or a durable inertia, making the potential to rise or fall from one’s status highly unlikely (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, the answer to understanding how structures of hierarchy and domination persist lies in exploring how cultural resources, processes, and institutions keep individuals in these self-perpetuating hierarchies (Swartz, 1997). For Bourdieu (1986), power is at the center of all social life and culture is an expression of this power. His concept suggests that the noneconomic goods and services of culture like “verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences,
information about the school system, and educational credentials can become a power resource” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, pp. 155-156). If culture is a power resource for education, one’s natural intelligence or aptitude for school can no longer be attributed as the sole reason for academic success. Instead, Bourdieu (1986) breaks with conventional wisdom that sees intelligence and personal attributes as the reason for academic success and alternatively proposes that educational achievement is better attributed to one’s amount and type of cultural capital. His research demonstrates that there is an unequal distribution of capital and that this affects not only one’s social position but also affects one’s educational attainment. Bourdieu finds it useful to think of culture -- especially in the form of educational credentials -- as a kind of capital (“scholastic capital”) that can be purchased with time, energy and money and then exchanged for occupations with high statuses and incomes (Swartz, 1997, p. 198). Social classes differ greatly in their amounts of education and Bourdieu (1986) finds that one’s academic performance is strongly related to their parents’ educational background and according to Bourdieu (1986), the chances for upward mobility for lower class youth are minimal.

Central to Bourdieu’s (1986) theory are the concepts of habitus and field. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is the system of “durable, transposable dispositions” that generates one’s practices and perceptions. Habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, which starts in childhood and becomes our ingrained ideas and behaviors. For Bourdieu, our habitus (dispositions) and our expressions of power operate in structured arenas called fields. Fields are hierarchical spaces each with their own laws of functioning and their own force. Examples of fields include the economic field, the educational field, the political field, the cultural field, etc. (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). In any given field, agents occupy positions and compete for control of the resources specific to that field. In the academic field, for example, capital is measured by degrees, diplomas, and awards. Degrees, diplomas, and awards hold specific capital in this field and would not necessarily be recognized or prized as capital in another field, such as in the aesthetic field, for example.

For me, placing Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of habitus, field and capital into a consumable scenario provides a much clearer picture of his argument. For instance, a white, upper class male in the United States in a high status, high income job, is in this position because previous time and generations, unconsciously acquired traits, and an accumulation of
resources and opportunities were allowed to reproduce themselves. This social reproduction is responsible for this white, upper class male’s habitus, or disposition, which holds instilled ambitions and expectations with regard to higher education and a career. The white, upper class male holds largely unconscious ideas about his chances of success and how his society works, based on his family’s history that has placed them within a particular social class. Bourdieu believes there is a high correlation between one’s social class and their ambitions and expectations with regard to education.

However, let us now compare our white, upper class male of high social status with a working class minority female who never went to college and works a job of low status and low income. According to Bourdieu (1986), she would not have aspired to educational attainment because she would have internalized and resigned herself to the limited opportunities for school success that exist for those without much cultural capital, or because she simply lacks the knowledge to attain something greater than what she, her family, and neighborhood have acquired. In contrast, our upper class male internalized his social advantages as expectations for academic success and, thus went to school and occupies the type of position expected by those of his social status. Here is what we must understand in this scenario: our white, upper class male is not more intelligent than our working class minority female. Instead, our white, upper class male is the beneficiary of his parents’ capital, which placed him in a good neighborhood with excess resources and excellent schools. Unlike our female minority, he has had the expectations and the resources that have been preparing him for an education and a certain range of careers since birth.

According to Bourdieu (1986), the force behind these statuses is the exchange of capital -- economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital can be immediately transmitted to others and has a direct convertibility into cash and assets. Economic capital, through time and investment, can also be converted into and from both cultural and social capital. Cultural capital is transmitted over a long period of time within one’s home and can take three forms, or states -- embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. In the embodied state, cultural capital is exhibited through one’s passively acquired cultural dispositions, such as skills and understanding. For example, the white, upper class male may have attended a prestigious university. To do so, he needed to understand how to complete university entrance requirements, and he needed the skills to be able to research and complete these
requirements, all of which are probably known by his parents. In its objectified state, cultural capital incorporates physical objects like writings, paintings and instruments and also requires one know how to use these objects. For example, the white, upper class male may have purchased a number of SAT preparation books during his high school days in hopes of wooing elite schools with top scores. He needed to both own these books, as well as know how to utilize the information within books for a better score. Finally, cultural capital can present itself in its institutionalized state. Bourdieu cites academic credentials or qualifications as an example. Our white, upper class male may have possessed institutional cultural capital by graduating from his high school with top grades and with honors, for example, or if he is lacking in the ability to acquire such grades, had the resources to obtain tutoring and specialized classes that could teach him how to take the SAT. Again, he is a product of the resources and expectations of his status. In the case of the female minority, while she may have strong grades she may lack knowledge on how to take standardized tests, resources to teach her what will be on the tests so that she may prepare, or a lack of funds to register for the test.

Bourdieu’s (1986) final form of capital, social capital, operates in networks that are linked to socially valued resources. Bourdieu defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential,’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, social capital is about who you know and how to use these relationships to your benefit. Social capital and cultural capital work together. Our social networks are reproduced through exchanges, which take time and effort (Bourdieu, 1986). One’s social capital does not have any value unless one knows how to use these networks through their cultural capital (cultural dispositions and skills and understanding.) Our white, upper class male, for example, may have worked with other students of similar dispositions when applying for college. He may have studied for the SATs with others, compared entrance essays, shared deadlines within his network and met with other students to work on entrance requirements together. This exchange in information,
organization, and advice would have built a body of knowledge that was advantageous to our white, upper class male and the others within his network.

Again, Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital only operates within distinct social fields. A field is a distinct social space that is regulated by its own specific logic, and is often referred to as a game with its own explicit and implicit rules (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lareau, 2001). Capital manifests depending upon the field and capital is unequally distributed across the field. For example, our white, upper class male is only at an advantage in certain situations, such as when applying for college. His top SAT scores, graduation with honors, and fulfillment of the admissions requirements places him at an advantage over other college applicants who may not have these qualifications. However, our white, upper class male would not be at an advantage if he tried to enter some other field, like modeling, acting, singing, or cosmetology, which would not place importance on test scores and grades. In other words, being a white, upper class male does not equal capital in all situations. Capital can only manifest in relation to a field that names some resources as scarce and others as valuable and unequally distributed.

**BOURDIEU WITHIN THIS STUDY**

Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital function on the basis of the unequal distribution of resources and structural constraints that are socially reproduced. As previously mentioned, social reproduction refers to how stratified social systems of hierarchy and power persist and reproduce themselves across generations. However, Bourdieu’s theory is only used as a guideline in this research as this study seeks to incorporate his ideas of cultural and social capital for understanding how cultural dispositions are categorized within the dominant US culture, and how relationships and networks within the field of postsecondary education may provide advantages for social mobility. In this study, cultural capital refers to the student’s cultural dispositions, as well as the student’s institutional knowledge of how the postsecondary system works. Social capital in this study refers to the members of the student’s network, from family and friends, to community college personnel students may be affiliated with (instructors, counselors, staff, etc.) This study operates on Bourdieu’s idea that cultural and social capital work together.
Despite Bourdieu’s (1986) warnings of institutional reproductions, this research hopes to uncover whether some persistent Latino community college students may be using their cultural and social capital for social mobility just as our white, upper class male does. Even though their various capitals may be less than our fictional white male, they may still create a network that forms a catalyst for success. As mentioned earlier, most of the literature on minority postsecondary persistence regurgitates warnings of student constraints and social reproduction. This work hopes to move away from this negative research by following the example of researchers like Nora and Rendon (1990), Stanton-Salazar (2001), Bensimon and Dowd (2009), and others who focus on the potential profit minorities may have thanks to the resources available through their cultural disposition, and the possible institutional knowledge gained through their families, networks, and interactions.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This thesis studies the role of cultural and social capital in the postsecondary persistence of Latino college students. Qualitative research methods were used to investigate students in four areas: family upbringing, community college integration and access to information, the possibility of a transfer agent in the students’ lives, and student insights on and recommendations for Latino student success. The analysis is based on post-transfer experiences of six interview subjects who self-identify as Latina/o, three male and three female. Of the six subjects, four were current undergraduate students at the junior and senior level at San Diego State University, and two had graduated from San Diego-area universities within the past five years.

SAMPLING

This study used purposive or judgment sampling. In this type of sampling, the investigator decides the purpose they want the informants to serve and then looks for informants who meet that purpose (Bernard, 2000). As the objective of the study is to understand the particular experiences of Latinos, this type of sampling was used to select Latinos who are unlikely to have had access to high cultural capital as Bourdieu (1986) sees it, but who gained access through their family and/or postsecondary fields.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary source of data collection. Bernard (2000) defines semi-structured, in-depth interviews as those that follow a general script and cover a list of topics, but that are also open-ended (Bernard, 2000, p. 190). This was a useful technique for this study as it provided enough structure to allow for consistency across interviews, but also allowed room for further questioning when necessary. Interviews were held in public places (coffee shops, libraries, etc.) in San Diego, CA and permission to tape record the interviews was requested and granted for all interviews. Field notes were also taken during and immediately following the interviews.
DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this study followed a deductive analysis to test the original hypothesis that academic persistence through the postsecondary pipeline requires that students are helped along either by a transfer agent with social capital; or by family and friends who deliver explicit messages and support from childhood through college; or both. I kept running notes throughout the collection and looked for new research hypotheses and directions. I then produced transcripts of the interviews, identified categories, compared categories, and built models and exemplars using Excel.

SUBJECT RECRUITMENT

Access to subjects was obtained in three ways. First, I asked San Diego State University professors and personnel in the departments of Latin American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, and in the Tutoring Center of the EOP office if I may post a study recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) in their offices. Second, San Diego State University faculty provided referrals to students who they believed met the criteria. Lastly, a professor in the department of Latin American Studies at San Diego State University allowed me to make an announcement in a course with a number of junior and senior-level Latino students enrolled. All three methods yielded participants with the latter being the most successful.

SUBJECT CHARACTERISTICS

The following criteria were initially used to identify subjects who were unlikely to have had access to social capital in their K-12 experiences, but who may have gained capital at the community college level. Participants were initially recruited using the following criteria:

1. Have done the majority of their schooling in the US and graduated from a United States high school (either GED or traditional). This criterion was chosen to help create a common ground on which to compare subjects’ previous educational experiences. Students who graduated from high school in another country will have had different educational experiences.

2. Attended a community college in order to complete their lower division coursework and then successfully transferred to a four-year university. This study examines the attainment of cultural and social capital gained in the home and gained at community college. Students who did not attend and transfer from a community college would not benefit this study.
3. Currently enrolled as full-time undergraduates in good academic standing at the junior or senior level at San Diego State University OR graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a four-year university within the last five years. It was required that subjects still enrolled in the four-year university be on track and eligible to graduate. Five years was chosen as the limit to control for any transfer and technological differences (within the last five years, students transferred using similar transfer agreements, met similar transfer requirements and transferred using online applications, etc.).

4. Self-identify as Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican-American or of other Hispanic or Latino origin. Latinos are the most likely group to attend a community college and go no further. This study seeks to understand why some Latino students overcome these statistics and receive a baccalaureate degree.

5. Parents have little or no formal higher education and students were the first in their immediate family to attend college. This criterion was chosen to help identify cases of social mobility, rather than cases of social reproduction.

While five of the six participants met all of the above criteria, one of the subjects had done much schooling in Mexico and determined that more than half of her schooling was completed in Mexico. Due to the overall low numbers of Latinos who transfer from a community college and near completion of a degree, it was determined that this criteria should be relaxed for the sake of obtaining participants. As a result, all participants met all the aforementioned criteria except one subject who did not meet criteria number one.

Subjects by pseudonym and their specific criteria are listed in Table 1.

Four of the six participants were of the 1.5 generation, which refers to individuals who began their permanent residency in the United States during childhood or in their early teens. The fifth participant was second generation, meaning she was born in the US and raised by first generation immigrant parents. The sixth participant was first generation, meaning she had spent most of her childhood and teen years in Mexico and immigrated to the US in her late teens.

Participants self-identified under the following categories: Latina/o, Mexican, Mexican-American, and Mixtec, a category not previously accounted for but which reflects an indigenous heritage from Mexico.

CONFIDENTIALITY

In order to protect the identities of the students, pseudonyms were assigned for all subjects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age; sex; ethnicity</th>
<th>1st in Family to go to College</th>
<th>Generation in US</th>
<th>Years in the c.c.</th>
<th>Degree status; university; major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>31; male; Latino</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1.5 (came to the US at age 5 from Mexico)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>B.A. obtained; UC San Diego; International Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa</td>
<td>35; female; Latina</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1st (came to US in late teens from Mexico)</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>B.A. in progress (junior); SDSU; Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kari</td>
<td>21; female; Mexican-American</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>2nd (born in CA to immigrant parents from Mexico)</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>B.A. in progress (junior); SDSU; Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteban</td>
<td>27; male; Mexican</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1.5 (came to the US at age 2 from Mexico)</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>B.A. obtained; SDSU; Criminal Justice Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>26; Female; Mixtec</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1.5 (came to the US at age 5 from Mexico)</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>B.A. in progress (junior); SDSU; Anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>27; male; Latino</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>1.5 (came to the US at age 12 from Mexico)</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>B.A. in progress (senior); SDSU; Marketing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All research files (tapes and notes) were stored in a locked drawer in my personal home office until the data was recorded and uploaded, at which point it was shredded and/or deleted.

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

Before beginning each interview, students were asked to read and sign an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). One interview protocol (see Appendix C) was developed and used as a guideline for the interviews. The protocol was divided into six parts: the Introduction, which described the purpose of the research to subjects; Student Information, which requested general data on family, linguistics and schooling from subjects; Signals from Home and Family, which introduced the idea of cultural capital to subjects and asked them to reflect on the cultural capital they may have acquired in the home as it related to their school life; Community College, which addressed how subjects were or were not integrated there; Transfer Agents, in which a definition was provided to subjects and subjects were asked to reflect on whether or not they may have had a transfer agent at the community college level or at some other point in their schooling; and Overall Reasons for Student Success, where subjects were asked to reflect on their personal reasons for success as well as share recommendations on how community college personnel might facilitate student transfer from two to four-year institutions.

**TRANSCRIPTIONS**

Interview recordings were uploaded from the tape recorder to a PC in audio format. I then repeatedly listened to the recordings of the six interviews and took notes on each as themes emerged. I took significant portions of the interviews, those that reflected themes and trends, and transcribed them verbatim.

**BUILDING RAPPORT WITH SUBJECTS**

Students who responded to this study were excited to be interviewed and many thanked me for my interest in their story, and for working in support of Latino education. In order to build rapport with subjects, most pre-interview communication (phone and email) began by me describing my personal interest for conducting this study (I grew up in a largely Latino community where few Latino peers pursued higher education, I hope to work in the
community college system to motivate students to continue with education, etc.) Upon meeting subjects, I spent time “getting to know” them by asking about their work, schools, and families before beginning the interview. Interviews were scheduled to last 30 - 60 minutes, but in nearly all interviews, we spent much time discussing beyond the prescribed time and interview protocol, delving into subjects’ personal histories and hopes for the future. Subjects spoke candidly and at length. In all six interviews, male and female subjects shed tears as they expressed feelings of frustration, fear, disappointment, joy, pride, and gratitude in recounting their experiences. I also shed tears. This reflected the high level of trust between subjects and researcher as well as open and honest communication.

Immediately following each interview, I wrote copious fieldnotes on a template (see Appendix D) highlighting key points, interesting quotes, overall observations, and post-interview reflections. Keeping descriptive field notes helped me remember emergent themes and patterns during the analysis phase.

**LIMITATIONS**

There were three notable limitations to this study. First, the purpose of this study was to hear from a few Latino students directly, not to make confirmations about the experiences of an entire population. The sample size was small and the results from this study should not speak for all Latino transfer students. Instead, it would be beneficial to conduct larger, follow-up confirmatory studies to compare and contrast more students’ responses with the six stories included in this study. Second, due to time limitations, this was not a longitudinal study. Thus, students had to reflect upon and recall previous academic experiences and the research relied upon memory, which can be faulty. Follow-up studies in real time, involving direct observation through the entire transfer process would be beneficial. Finally, this study only examined Latino or indigenous students from Mexico and comparisons with students of other racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds were not made. Further studies might examine the Latino transfer experience and how it compares and contrasts with the experiences of other racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

**CONCLUSION**

The goal of this study was to use qualitative methodologies to examine the experiences of six Latino transfer students in order to understand their successes in their own
words. The methodology used in this study was chosen due to its ability to direct me toward this goal. Although the methodology had inherent limitations, it was beneficial in providing research that reflects a complex understanding of the roles cultural and social capital and transfer agents played in the experiences of these students. It is my hope that these students’ stories may serve as a model and a motivator to other students and educators. The results of this study and the voices of the students themselves are shared in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

It is May 21, 2011 and as I sit compiling notes, transcribing interviews and reflecting on student responses, President Barack Obama delivers his Weekly Address, this time titled *Congress Should Reform No Child Left Behind This Year*. Obama, the quintessential example of a minority student who succeeded, warns Congress that the Bush era educational policies are not working and that reform cannot wait. He urges a bottom-up approach to education, wherein parents, teachers, and administrators drive the reform process. He tells the story of Booker T. Washington High School in South Memphis, who overcame crime and poverty to send 70 percent of their students on to college. He says we need to stop looking at what has gone wrong in education, and start looking at how we can set things right.

Obama’s words could not be more reflective of the goals of this research. Like Obama’s recommendation, this thesis hopes to shine light on resilient students, parents and teachers and provide a bottom-up model for postsecondary persistence. Hearing from the students themselves underpins this holistic approach to conceptualizing Latino student success.

FAMILY TIES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital refers to knowledge that is learned through families and neighborhoods (Bourdieu, 1986). Mexican immigrant parents come from a country in which the average formal educational attainment is much lower than in the United States. In fact, according to the Instituto Nacional Estadística, Geografía e Informática of Mexico, the average number of years a Mexican citizen will spend in school is 8.6, meaning most do not go further than a junior high education (Instituto Nacional Estadística, Geografía e Informática de Mexico, 2010). Significant to this thesis is the reality that this is a national average; most children in rural areas do not acquire more than a fourth or fifth grade education due to both responsibilities to the family and to the lack of schools beyond primary in their area. The six students in this study all had Mexican immigrant parents with low
levels of education, and according to Bourdieu (1986), social reproduction should occur and these students should have acquired little capital as it relates to academics and thus should have remained low-performing academically speaking. However, these students are examples of social mobility, not social reproduction, which begs the question: what factors mitigated the effects of low parent education among these high performing, upwardly mobile Latinos?

One theme that was clearly present in all six interviews was a consistent verbal reinforcement in the home that education was important. Although each of the six students said their parents were unable to help them with homework throughout the majority of their education (due to long hours on the job, an inability to comprehend the material, or a lack of English language skills), all six students recounted at least one memory of a family member who delivered clear signals that education was a priority. For example, Alejandro remembers an auspicious moment with his father, who was a construction worker.

My dad used to install air conditioners and do pipe fitting and when I was 13 or 14...my dad was working at UCSD on the big library there, the Geisel Library. He had just finished this job and he wanted me to see what the library looked like. The library is huge and the architecture is kind of different, so I think he just wanted to...show me what he was a part of. I don’t know, maybe he wanted me to be proud of him, or something...Anyway, as I mentioned before my dad was always working so it was a chance for me to spend some time with him so we went to UCSD and we walked over to the big library and his message to me [at the library] was, ‘Go to school. Don’t do the same type of work that I do’, which was construction, hard labor...On very few occasions he helped me with my homework, but ‘go to school’ was always the message...I couldn’t help but think of that day and how weird it was how everything had worked out...[Tears]...when I graduated from UCSD about 10 years later...I guess his always telling me to go to school worked...even though he didn’t really help me or really show me how to get there (A. Torres, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

Although all six subjects in this study described repeated verbal messages from at least one parent about the importance of going to college, the signal to go to college may not come exclusively from parents. In Paula’s case, an older sister was the first in her immediate family to go to college. Paula’s sister planted the postsecondary seed, also through an introduction to the library.

When I started high school my sister started community college. Just by her being in a community college...she started telling me and my other sister, ‘You’re going to go to school, you’re going to go to school.’... My freshman year, when I was 15, that’s when it started. I didn’t really think of [college] before that...I remember
she would take us to the library at Mesa [Community] College to study just to get the sense of it and then when she transferred to San Diego State she started bringing us here to the library when we were still in high school, me and my cousins, and we would come here and do our homework here. And then we would go to [University of San Diego], too...and go study in their study rooms there. So we were pretending to be college students but we were still in high school. I think she grew the seed in us. [She would tell us], ‘You girls have to go to college. It’s important. It’s going to help you, help the family, help the community.’ (P. Trejo, personal communication, May 23, 2011)

Although none of the students used this term, a recurrent trend in the interviews was that most students’ families reflected the immigrant ideals of the American Dream. All six of the students expressed a passion for helping their families achieve this dream. Esteban, whose parents came from Oaxaca, Mexico when he was very young, explained:

My dad’s a gardener, my mom cleans homes, and they would always stress to go on to college. From the very beginning, they would tell my brother and me to become someone, to have a profession and to not work like they did...My parents were always atrás de mí in my education. They would always stress that that’s why they moved to this country. For them to seek a better life, and for their kids to not have to work like they did. And just to have an opportunity...In Oaxaca, we didn’t have a phone, we didn’t have a TV, all we had was our agriculture. I know my dad wanted to provide for his parents and for us. Seeing my parents struggle to try to succeed in the different goals they had, seeing how hard they struggled all my life, just their stories...[Tears]...I think it’s amazing for someone to just pick up and go to a whole new place and to know that you’re going to get there and succeed without knowing the language or the culture, to me that’s just heroic. They’re amazing. Seeing them wake up everyday and work as hard as they do, I just knew I had to do something to pay them back...[Tears]...If it wasn’t for their hard work and determination, who knows where I’d be today. I knew from the beginning, in this country, you can work and get by in construction without school, but for the most part, this country is about an education. I knew that education was the way, and somehow my parents knew it, too (E. Mejias, personal communication, May 22, 2011).

Paula also expressed a desire to help her family reach their dreams. In her explanation, she describes obvious feelings of discrimination she and her family experienced as indigenous immigrants to this country and how her postsecondary education might ameliorate this injustice:

Postsecondary education has helped me a lot to grow as an individual and to become a better person. I got the opportunity to learn about my Mixtec history and started embracing my native language, culture and identity. I also saw education as a way to fight all these injustices that my family and I were going through. Only through education we are able to share our experience and have a strong voice in this society (P. Trejo, personal communication, May 23, 2011).
But how do American dreams of higher education stand up in the face of emotional or economic hardship? Is education still the family’s priority when obstacles make pursuing higher education difficult? Three of the six subjects, two females and one male, faced unexpected pregnancies early in their postsecondary education. Kari and Marisa are both single mothers whose parents currently help them with childcare. The mother of Miguel’s son lives in Mexico and is the primary caretaker of their child. Though their relationship is estranged, Miguel says he is planning to marry her soon in order to bring his son over.

Marisa says she was on her own both financially and academically as she navigated the first years of a community college system she and her parents did not understand. However, her family was able to provide support during a difficult divorce and in raising her child. Her persistence in school was supported by her parents, even during her pregnancy and subsequent divorce.

I am a single mother and had my daughter six years ago. She is in kindergarten and her teachers give me diplomas because she is doing so great in her school. I am so proud of her! I never imagined I would be a single mom. I grew up with very religious parents and I thought I would never be divorced, and never be a single mom. I had to go through a divorce, study, be working, and have a baby all at the same time. It was so hard! I was very depressed. And I had to make a choice, either go down, or struggle and find my way... I needed to be strong for my daughter and my parents...[Tears]...Thank God for my parents. They help me so much and support me in my school and in everything I do. I live with them and I work full time as a cashier and I study. Without them, I wouldn’t be here. But, I’m here! And I don’t want to stop here. I think people need support. Look for that support wherever you can and you can go far. I can honestly say I am finally happy now. I am interested in helping kids. I want to go far in my career and I want to help others. My daughter is my motivation (M. Marquez, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Like Marisa, Kari is also educationally motivated by her child, and her family supported her dreams of continuing school, even in the face of emotional and financial hardship. She explains:

I became pregnant at 17 and had my son at 18 and that changed everything, especially coming from such a strong-rooted Mexican family. [Having my son] didn’t change my goals but things became more of a challenge from that point on...After I had my son, I worked part time at Subway [sandwich shop], took care of my son and focused on my education for three years straight. I did not have a break in three years. It was very difficult trying to manage everything. My earning an income became a priority for my family when my son was born but my parents never discouraged me from continuing my dreams of school. When I first found out I was pregnant, I thought all my educational goals and dreams were out the
door. My dad was very disappointed. But, my parents never discouraged me from continuing school. The fact that I became a mom at such a young age has just pushed me to keep going and having my son became the biggest educational motivator. I have to do this. I have to do it for my parents and my son (K. Palermo, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Miguel’s family, on the other hand, was less supportive of his decision to attend school instead of work after he found out he was going to be a father.

I was 18 and had just graduated high school. I was home visiting my mom’s family in DF [Mexico City] all ready to go to City [Community] College in the fall when my girlfriend down there told me she was pregnant. I was like, ‘NO!’...You know, when I told my family, my dad was like, ‘Well, forget school, get a job. You have a kid now.’ I thought I was going to have to give up everything and just work whatever job I could find. It was a hard decision, but I decided to come back [to San Diego] and go to City...I got really depressed while I was here. I gained a lot of weight and didn’t really have friends and I felt really bad about missing my boy grow up, and stuff...[Tears]...So, you know, I have a lot of [student] loans and I send her money. Even though we don’t talk, I’m going to marry her just to bring my son over. I had to do this. I feel bad but I always knew I had to go to college... Hey, if you can think about it you can do it, you know? We have to be the creators of our own destiny, right? (M. Lopez, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Kinship ties became a powerful theme and an obvious factor in student persistence throughout the interviews. There was a clear pervasiveness of what Gloria and Rodriguez (2000) call familismo, a term used to describe Latinos’ custom to seek out support from their family members in every situation, issue, or dilemma. In familismo, decisions are made by families, not by individuals, contrary to many white families. Gloria and Rodriguez offer the following definition: “the pervasiveness of familismo is manifested by (a) providing material and emotional support to other family members, (b) relying primarily on family members for help and support, (c) using family members as referents for attitudes and behavior, and (d) placing the needs of the family or of family members before individual needs” (p. 150). College students, though, do not always adhere to the dynamics of familismo. According to Rivera (2008), the Hispanic student may disavow home ties despite the guilt that may accompany such a decision, only to become isolated (p. 25). In Miguel’s case, he had to do what he thought was right, despite the pressure from his father to get a job and stay with his son instead of go to college.

Researchers in several disciplines have observed familismo as a key component to Latino culture and decision-making. Marisa, Kari and Miguel all faced parental reactions to
unplanned pregnancies. Marisa and Kari relied on parents for help and support and looked to their parents’ influence in deciding whether to stop or continue their education. Thus, while parental affirmation and support is key in the persistence of many Latino students, the students themselves recognize that their parents do not have the capital to help them succeed academically, and they must be self-advocates when it comes to persistence. While in all six interviews students said they received verbal signals from family that education was important, and all six students clearly expressed a passion for helping their families achieve their immigrant dreams, all six students also said they had to “figure things out on their own” when it came to college. Many Latino parents do not have the social capital to help their children academically. However, in some fortunate cases, students discover a transfer agent to help fill in this capital gap. In the next section, we examine how transfer agents facilitate persistence in the postsecondary pipeline.

**Social Capital, Transfer Agents, and the B.A.**

Social capital is the value embodied in networks linked to socially valued resources and is traditionally thought of as a form of symbolic power to which individuals either do or do not have access (Bourdieu, 1986). All students in this study entered the community college with little or no social capital. As five out of six were the first in their families to attend college, they did not have any institutional avenues for accessing social capital. The exception is Paula, whose older sister provided college knowledge in the form of relationships with community college counselors and instructors, as well as university application and transfer know-how. But, according to Bourdieu, Paula’s older sister (the first in her family to go to college) and all six students in this essay should have been confined by social reproduction. Instead, their progress toward a BA shows clear social mobility. What, then, were the institutional factors contributing to their access of social capital, transfer, and progress toward the BA?

I begin by building a model of the six subjects in this research, starting in their community college years. Studies show that students who are socially integrated in school by participating in extracurricular activities are more likely to feel attached to school and do well. In particular, Latinos whose primary relationships are at school, as opposed to away from school, are more likely to persist and not drop out (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).
However, five of the six students in this study were not involved in leadership and/or extracurricular opportunities in their community college campus communities. The exception is Paula, who was involved in her community college’s Puente Program for transfer. Paula became involved in Puente after a difficult two-year hiatus from community college. All six of the students in this research worked at an off-campus job more than 20 hours per week while community college was in session and had little extra time between family obligations, work, and school. Lack of participation in extra-curricular activities means students lack on-campus integration. This is significant as on-campus integration often leads to helpful social capital resources in the form of peers who may be planning to transfer. Lack of on-campus integration also hurts students’ applications to universities who often look for “well-rounded” individuals involved in a variety of on-campus clubs and leadership positions. When asked why he did not participate in extra-curricular activities at his community college or at his university, Alejandro stated:

Because I needed to work. You know, I would’ve liked to do ASB [student government] or a language club, or something like that, but I was usually working like 30 hours a week when school was in session, so I pretty much had no free time for anything else. I barely even had time to eat. I needed to work and go to school. I left a little time for soccer on the weekends, but work and school were my priority (A. Torres, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

All six students said they entered community college feeling lost, unsure of what to study, and most described spending at least one semester enrolled in courses that would not help them transfer to a university. Miguel recalls his first year at the community college:

My first year at [community college] was pretty much a total waste of time. I was enrolled in classes like weight training because nobody ever told me what to enroll in. There is like no support there when you start. You pay your [tuition] over the internet and then you just pick these random classes that seem interesting...and they offer them, so it’s like, cool this is an option? Okay, I will take weight training then and hopefully that will help me get to a university. I was wrong and I pretty much wasted a lot of time for nothing (M. Lopez, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

In addition to wasting time enrolled in the wrong classes and working long hours while school was in session, subjects also exhibited other significant risk factors that typically contribute to attrition, including unplanned pregnancies, lack of parental education, lack of money for school, lack of transportation to school, struggling with the English language, siblings and cousins involved in gang life, attending a low performing high school
where few classmates went to college, having had a long commute to/from school, and taking one or more breaks (at least a semester off) in their schooling.

The resiliency of these six students is remarkable, and while all six subjects described the influence of transfer agents, Paula was lucky enough to have familial social capital in the form of her older sister, who had navigated the community college system before her:

My parents didn’t have higher education, so they couldn’t help me...My sister helped me a lot. She helped me apply for Mesa College...so it was an easy transition. All I had to do was pick classes and apply for financial aid when I graduated high school...She also introduced me to her counselors and her teachers and whenever I would take classes teachers would know [my last name] and I felt like they had expectations of me and I already had those networks set-up...so they guided me, those professors, and counselors. And then when I transferred to San Diego State, my sister told me, ‘Make sure you talk to your counselors,’ and she would give me all this advice, and tell me what to do (P. Trejo, personal communication, May 23, 2011).

Paula’s comment leads us to the most significant common denominator found in all six subjects in this study: Latino parents, while generally encouraging of higher education, do not have the social capital to guide children through the postsecondary pipeline. Crossing over the postsecondary hurdle requires that someone with social capital step forward in the lives of these students to lead the way. While Paula’s sister stepped forward to act as her main transfer agent, Paula and the other five students all found support, encouragement and confidence in the form of teachers and counselors along the way. Esteban describes his experience:

My first year at [the community college], my classes were kind of a joke. Weight lifting, Intro to Spanish, just so I could pass and play soccer for the [community] college. My second year there I finally got into general ed classes and took a biology course and my biology instructor woke me up out of my little dream world after I flunked an exam with him. I was at the bottom, I got an F on his test and he called me out...I think he saw that I was better than that. His name was Mr. Johansson, I’ll never forget him. I credit Mr. Johansson for really helping me...When the class ended, I would go back to him and check in and talk to him and I developed a friendship with him. He got me into this program called UC Outreach, which was a college prep program that let us visit UC campuses. It kind of put me on track. I credit him...but things really started in junior high with a counselor, Ms. Schropshier, who kept telling me, ‘Go to college, you’re smart.’ This counselor knew my family, she knew my cousins were in the gang life, but she saw something better for me. She planted the seed. Then I guess Mr. Johansson reinforced that (E. Mejias, personal communication, May 22, 2011).
Marisa was fortunate enough to have a few community college instructors who helped her reach her educational goals:

My professors at my community college were so motivating! They really gave me the confidence to go forward. Professor Antonio Crespo was so amazing! He helped me pick my major, Spanish. He knew I loved to teach others about my language. He was always telling me, ‘Marisa, did you apply to SDSU? You can do it! Don’t give up! If you don’t find the answers in this office, let’s try that office, but don’t ever give up.’...I was so lucky. I also had such a great history teacher. She was from from the US and she helped me transition with college so much...She wrote me a letter of recommendation for SDSU and she kept telling me, ‘Marisa, I am so proud of you!’...Later in my time at the community college, my counselor also helped me a lot. His name was Cruz and he would tell me, ‘You can do it. It doesn’t matter that you are a single mom or that English is not your first language, keep going forward and do more!’ He helped me, and because of him I knew how to apply [to SDSU] and because of all these wonderful people, making me feel like I could, I made it! (M. Marquez, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Counselors, but especially one teacher, also played a significant role in Kari’s postsecondary persistence:

I’m the first in my family to go to college, so I really didn’t know what I was doing as far as transferring. In my second year at the community college I got into EOP through Cal Works, which requires you to see a transfer counselor three times per year. Just seeing the lines in my community college for the regular transfer counselors was overwhelming. I am so glad I got to meet with EOP counselors three times per year because they helped me so much...EOP helped but it really was one professor I met who made such an impact on me. His name was John Vento. I took him for Poli-Sci 101 and he changed my whole academic career and my life, really... On the first day of class, he was loud and strict and authoritative and I thought, I’ll never pass this class. He told us, ‘I don’t do multiple choice exams. Get ready to read and write like you never have in your life.’ I was so intimidated by him. He made it known that he expected a lot from us. Participation and reading were required. He enforced discipline in studying and he is the one who taught me how to take good notes, read with attention, and come to class prepared. I took three classes with him and I became a better student because of him...He loved UCLA -- that’s where he went. I told him I wanted to be a lawyer, and one day he said to me ‘I know you’re going to be a lawyer and then your son is going to grow up to be a lawyer.’ He always asked about my son, he made a personal connection with me, and he always believed in me throughout my time there. It’s because of him that I want to go to UCLA for law school when I finish here at SDSU (K. Palermo, personal communication, May 18, 2011).
Like the other students, Miguel also had a teacher who made an impact on him. When given Bensimon and Dowd’s (2009) definition of a transfer agent, and then asked if he felt he had a transfer agent at the community college, Miguel said the following:

You would think the transfer center would’ve been my transfer agent, but to tell you the truth, I didn’t even know where the transfer center was until I was pretty much ready to transfer...It took me almost two years of just kind of doing whatever at City [College] until this Indian professor asked me what I was doing. He was my professor for business and he made the class so cool. I became really interested in everything he was saying and his class kind of motivated me to keep going in business. He used to give me a lot of good feedback on my papers and he made his office hours pretty mandatory. One time at his office he told me I should go to the transfer counselors and think about applying to a university. He had gone to SDSU, so I guess that’s really where the idea grew. I always knew I wanted to transfer, but I think I just got depressed about everything and was lost for a while and then I finally got the confidence again...It was like a light went off. I went to the transfer center, I got information on guaranteed transfer and then I was on my way (M. Lopez, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Alejandro echoes the other subjects’ experiences in that two of his community college instructors made an impact on him:

I feel I had two instructors who really changed my life. One of them was born and raised in the US and one was from Mexico. They were so different in their approach but they were both very helpful. One was positive and one was negative. My English teacher, Mr. Giardina, was very positive, and he really taught me how to write. I guess I started doing very well in his class he started showing positive reinforcement both publicly in class praising my papers, and privately outside of class by asking me about my plans for university and where I was looking to transfer to. He had this idea that I was a straight A student, even though I wasn’t, and every time he would see me, even after the class ended, he would ask me why I hadn’t transferred and he would say that I was better than just community college. I guess he saw something in me that I hadn’t yet seen in myself. It pushed me to do better. I felt so much more confident in myself - it made me feel like somebody believed in me and that I could be successful in a university. In that same semester I had another instructor who was much more tough love. On many occasions, in disgust with peoples’ projects and papers, he would express publicly in class thing like ‘You people who have been here [at the community college] for two years are just bouncing around wasting your time. What are you still doing here?’ He was Latino and he went to a community college and then transferred to a university and he would tell us things like, ‘I did it, so why can’t you?’...In looking back, I think Mr. Giardina’s positive approach had more of an impact and he was always so encouraging throughout my time there. But between the two of them, I realized it was time to transfer, and that I could be successful (A. Torres, personal communication, May 9, 2011).
Though Paula’s sister paved the way and she credits much of her transfer success to her sisters and her cousins, she does fondly remember one community college counselor who really made an impact. Paula’s family is indigenous from the Mixtec in Oaxaca, Mexico, and a counselor like Lupe was someone she could relate to:

Lupe Gonzales was my counselor for the Puente Project at Mesa College. She knew my older sister and as soon as I met her she really took me under her wing. She told me exactly what classes to take, with what professors...Lupe was very influential and I befriended her and she would share her story and her struggle and I related to her a lot. Her family used to work in the fields, she came from a farm worker background and she went though a lot of discrimination and injustice for being poor and her story was. . .wow! We can do it! (P. Trejo, personal communication, May 23, 2011).

**COMMON THEMES AND POINT OF INTEREST**

There are some common threads in these quotes on transfer agency. While families, peers and on-campus integration can be especially important for linking some students to social capital networks, instructors and counselors played the pivotal role in these students’ postsecondary persistence. These six stories demonstrate that since most Latinos will attend community college if they pursue a postsecondary education, it is critical that students encounter someone with social capital who can help guide or motivate their transfer. Marisa, Miguel, and Alejandro all used the word “confidence” when describing what tools their transfer agents gave them. In all six of these cases, while students received nurturing and encouragement from instructors and counselors, the relationships did not go beyond the classroom, office hours, or campus. In many cases, the faculty did not provide any specific academic support or guidance on how to get in to college and most did not spend long hours helping students fill out college applications or driving students to university campuses. However, these instructors and counselors played a significant role in helping students dream bigger and believe in themselves. This should come as encouraging insight for instructors and counselors who may note that even a small dose of extra pupil attention could make a huge difference in instilling confidence and motivating students to consider loftier goals.

These interviews also revealed some surprises. While I hypothesized that instructors and counselors who would make the most impact on Latino students would also be Latinos or minorities themselves, these six interviews revealed that shared racial/ethnic identity was not a factor in these positive faculty/student institutional relationships. While having a
common racial/ethnic background with transfer agents certainly may heighten ties between transfer agent and student, it definitely was not a requirement. What seemed to matter most to students was faculty interest in students’ personal and educational wellbeing.

Another point of interest was that interviews with these subjects revealed a clear five-step trajectory in the postsecondary pipeline of all six students. Below are the steps students experienced in crossing the border from a community college to a four-year institution:

1. Students felt lost in the beginning of the community college system, unsure of a specific major, how to transfer, and what classes to take. All six wasted precious time trying to navigate a system they did not fully understand.

2. Students were “woken up” by at least one counselor or teacher who provided encouragement, motivation, and/or referrals to helpful transfer resources.

3. Students experienced a period of self-discovery where they felt like they had the “confidence” or intelligence to achieve at a university. In Bourdieuan terms, students seemed to experience a change in *habitus* (enduring dispositions, preferences, and subconscious understandings usually acquired in childhood and related to social class position). This change in *habitus* allowed students to feel newly entitled to access social networks that would encourage their social mobility (i.e., transfer center, other instructors and counselors, etc.).

4. After transfer agent referrals, students subsequently sought help from the transfer center of transfer counselors and met necessary transfer requirements.

5. Students successfully transferred to a four-year university, four enrolled in EOP and other university support programs, and all persisted toward or completed the baccalaureate.

Once students reached the four-year university, most experienced some level of transfer shock, but all were also more confident in their goal of persistence. Four out of the six students are/were enrolled in EOP (Educational Opportunity Program) at the university level and for these four students, EOP support helped them create a network of peers with similar struggles and goals, provide mentors, and build strong social capital. Kari describes what EOP at SDSU has done for her:

EOP at SDSU helped me with my transition from Antelope Valley College. The first few weeks of [SDSU] I would always go in there and do my homework and study. I felt they were my new family here because they were the very first staff I met at SDSU. I felt their support, especially from Brian Spencer my EOP advisor and from Professor Robert Guzman, who was my Latin American Studies professor. Professor Robert Guzman gave me that trust to ask him for help if I needed anything. Bryan Spencer helped me choose my first four courses at SDSU, he was very supportive and interested in my goals. Both were available when I needed to discuss something. They are both very nice people. Recently, I applied
for the EOP SOAR Mentor position and I put Mr. Guzman as a reference. We continue to stay in touch. As for Bryan, he will continue to be one of my academic advisors until I finish my career at SDSU next spring (K. Palermo, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Marisa echoes these sentiments:

EOP personnel has helped me in so many ways. Since the first day, when I went to look for information about what documents I needed to transfer to San Diego State, they treated me very well, they were so helpful. When I went to the Summer Bridge Program, before the spring semester started, they helped me to get familiar with the departments at SDSU and meet new friends. They assigned me a mentor and EOP also gave me the opportunity to do my work in its department and use the computers, and they also had workshops that I was interested in, and tutors that helped me with my assignments and homework. All this helped me to succeed in my classes through the semester. I passed the first semester with three As and one B, thanks to them (M. Marquez, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Alejandro, who was not part of any support programs like EOP at the University level, describes what he felt made him successful after crossing the border to a four-year university:

UCSD was my dream school. I got into other [University of California] and [California State] Universities, but once I got in to UCSD, I knew I had to go there and by that point, I knew what classes to pick, I knew I needed to do all the other stuff you need to do to graduate. Even though it was different and it was harder, I was basically on a mission to get my degree. I think being at UCSD helped my school self-esteem even more because I knew had made it that far, I knew what to do...and I knew I could make it all the way (A. Torres, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

**CONCLUSION**

The following four factors were common in ameliorating the effects of low integration and little social capital on these six high-achieving Latinos: (1) verbal signals from a young age that education is important and/or a reliance on *familismo* in which family members support and affirm postsecondary persistence; (2) a desire to help their families reach their dreams, which is often connected to a desire to overcome the inequities they or their families have experienced as immigrants to this country; (3) teachers and/or counselors with social capital step forward in the lives of students to tell them “they can do it” and provide referrals that can help students persist; (4) students experience an identity change with regard to school and gain confidence in seeking out other resources with social capital to help them continue toward a BA, including at the university level.
The subjects in this research reflect Bensimon and Dowd’s (2009) work on transfer agency, which identifies community college instructors and counselors as essential in validating students’ aspirations to transfer from a community college to a four-year university. Bensimon and Dowd title this pivotal moment of transfer "crossing the border”, which they say requires a deep identity transformation aided by the “you can do it!” support of a transfer agent in a position of authority. The transfer agent instills confidence in the students, and the students experience a change in what Bourdieu (1986) terms *habitus*, or disposition, with regard to their postsecondary persistence. Interestingly, “confidence” was a term used independently by three students in this study when describing what their transfer agent gave them. In this study, students found transfer agents by chance, or by “serendipity”, as Bensimon and Dowd (2009) describe, and these haphazard and lucky encounters set the six students in this research on a faster, clearer trajectory through the postsecondary pipeline.

The majority of research on postsecondary attrition and persistence examines macro, outside influences and obstacles, such as institutional, integrative, cultural, linguistic and other “at-risk” personal and institutional factors that contribute to low levels of Latino persistence. This is a top-down approach. By looking at this issue from a bottom-up perspective, as Obama advised, and by hearing from the students themselves, we begin to see how important the students’ day-to-day experiences are in creating loftier goals and eventual social mobility. In other words, it may be time for a new conceptualization: to stop looking at risk factors and start looking at everyday interactions to see how we may learn from and emulate those who persist, and those who assist. The next and final chapter offers bottom-up recommendations for this shift.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this world under threat, colleges and universities remain our best hope. Today we ask all of America’s great colleges and universities to do more. The challenges of ensuring full access, according to ability rather than wealth or privilege have not been met. Until they are, we will forfeit some of the talent and genius that the world sorely needs. We cannot afford the loss. All institutions of higher education have the obligation to open the door more widely.

Nelson Mandela
Address to Amherst College
May 2005

As the nation’s fabric continues to change and as Latinos make up a larger part of the US demographic, educational professionals need to open doors and create novel ways to assist our youngest and fastest growing minority group in achieving their goals. While the majority of literature on Latinos in education focuses on the barriers that hinder Latino chances of earning a degree, some Latinos do persist in academia. The value of focusing on a new conceptualization that examines Latino persistence has a moral imperative but also a fiscal benefit: a well-educated US population means enhancing the country’s ability to move forward in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Hearing from successful Latinos themselves deepens our understanding of strategies both students and personnel may use to change the educational fate of academically disenfranchised students.

In this concluding chapter, we hear what the students themselves recommend, discuss research implications of this and other studies that examine academically persistent Latinos, and provide recommendations for future research.

STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

All six research subjects were asked the following question: “In your opinion, how can community college counselors, staff, and instructors improve the likelihood of Latino transfer from community colleges to a four-year university?” The following student responses revealed interesting commonalities and important insight.

Alejandro:
Community College instructors need to take more of a role in students’ lives. Many are just going through the motions. These instructors have direct access to students and see them on a daily basis. Just taking a few minutes in one class to tell students how important continuing their education is, where the transfer counseling center is, and telling students that they can do it, that would make a huge impact. Community college counselors could also reach out and give direction. Maybe counselors could do in-class presentations for students, sharing the basic steps for transferring. The counselors seem to be inaccessible and behind closed doors. They really need to come out of their offices and make the information accessible to all students - especially those that don’t have the first clue about something as intimidating as transferring to a big university. More student contact on the part of teachers and counselors. I think that would make a huge difference (A. Torres, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

Marisa:

A few of my community college professors showed me the world. They gave me the support and information and they were my motivation to transfer. The [community college] counselors were good too but many of them don’t make you feel like you are allowed or welcome in the office. They seem overwhelmed with students. [The community college] counselors should be more open and more accessible. Not all counselors are the same and not all teachers are the same, but many don’t have a personal interest in the students. Those that do [have a personal interest] give students a confidence and a feeling that the student is accepted at school and that is very powerful. The biggest thing professors and counselors can do is be there and show that they know students exist and go a little bit beyond the teacher or counselor level and reach out to the students. A little extra interest and more contact with students means so much! (M. Marquez, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Kari:

I think there needs to be more Latino organizations at community colleges, where students can have mentoring and hear stories of other Latinos who successfully transferred. Students need someone to relate to and a story to relate to, so more student clubs that promote Latino achievement would be really helpful at community colleges...Also, in the financial aid and counseling offices, the staff is just so overwhelmed and staff in these important places needs to be increased so [staff doesn’t] respond to students in a rude way. Students need help and they need to go to offices where people help them, make them feel welcome, not discourage them...Hiring more Latino staff might also help. Latino staff serve as a role model to other Latinos and students can relate to them. More Latino staff members at community college would make students feel motivated, and just a staff that really cares about students is the most important (K. Palermo, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Esteban:

Community colleges need to put the idea of transferring out there! Students shouldn’t have to go searching so hard for answers. All the answers [regarding
transfer] are in the back of an administration building, when they should really be out there for everyone to access. Maybe the counseling center could set a table outside in the middle of the community college campus, with counselors at a table with a sign saying ‘Come talk to us!’ Students should be able to access questions easily and counselors should be out there, making students feel comfortable. There’s a cultural barrier here. Most Mexicans in particular are a bit more reserved. We’re a collective culture and we’re not as in-your-face. We don’t like feeling intimidated and we’re not as pushy about getting answers out of people as other students might be. If someone comes up to us with information, we are more likely to respond and feel included. Counselors and teachers should be more accommodating about this cultural difference and actively reach out by about showing that they care about you and they want you to go on to experience a university (E. Mejias, personal communication, May 22, 2011).

Paula:

To get more Latinos to transfer and finish their degree, I would suggest more programs such as Puente, which informs students about universities and graduate school...As students, we need role models that believe in us. We need encouragement and guidance. We need someone to plant the seed in our heart that we can continue our academic journey. We need community support, where faculty members and students are both involved. A good counselor is also important, someone that cares for the students, someone that understands what the students are going through, someone approachable. I was very lucky to find my counselor in community college. She gave me wings, and I personally related to her story (P. Trejo, personal communication, May 23, 2011).

Miguel:

I think the best way to improve the likelihood of transfer is for counselors and teachers to show they care. Just the smallest conversation with a student might change that person’s life forever. A teacher may say [to a student] in passing, ‘Hey, transfer is possible and I know you can do it.’ For me, that’s all it took. Someone pointing me to the transfer center and encouraging me that I could go to a university, it was the smallest action but it really changed my life. I didn’t have a lot of confidence with school since I didn’t really know a lot of people who went to college, but that was one thing that really gave me the confidence to go forward and start talking to people about transferring. You know, a lot of Mexicans don’t feel comfortable around teachers and administrators. We kind of shut down because we feel like we don’t know them and we don’t even know the right questions to ask and we feel intimidated...Hey, it’s like this -- sometimes we need somebody who is somebody to tell us we are somebody, too (M. Lopez, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

Across the board, students feel they benefitted from the encouragement of instructors and counselors who instilled confidence, shared their own stories, or just gave students a warm nudge toward transfer counselors. Students want more of this, and recommend counselors and instructors check in on student progress. These six student recommendations reveal the
most important ingredient in the recipe for transfer: community college staff who go beyond the confines of their office or their job description to personally reach out to students and encourage them toward persistence.

**Implications and Recommendations**

This study shows the importance of looking beyond external cultural, academic, linguistic, financial, institutional and social barriers and instead looking at the importance of the everyday experiences of Latinos. The findings here demonstrate that the institution, administration and community college staff can have a profound impact on influencing Latino postsecondary persistence and that the answer may lie in simply reaching out and connecting with students, encouraging them toward loftier goals, and providing referrals and knowledge to make those goals attainable. This study brings forth empirical evidence that both collective and individual actions on the part of community college staff may lead to the successful accumulation of social capital among Latino students who are threatened by macro, institutional barriers.

This study also reveals strong implications for research using social and cultural capital theory as the framework. While the theoretical foundation of Bourdieu (1986) was useful in exploring the social mobility of students, Bourdieu and others suggest that either you have access to social capital or you do not. This study shows that there are alternative routes for accessing social capital and that this alternative access creates a change in *habitus* that allowed these Latino students to don an elite perspective on their right to higher education, or a permission to access information in the field of academia that was similar to that of their white counterparts. There is more freedom to change and advance social mobility and more variations within the dominant and subfields than Bourdieu (1986) suggests. In the end, individual and collective agency may play the biggest role of all. This research reflects that we may benefit more from using our sociological imaginations than the confines of Bourdieuan constructs when considering the educational advancement and social mobility of Latino students.

These interviews also demonstrate implications for practice. Community college faculty and staff need to take into consideration the ways in which their own role and social status may serve as an educational conduit for students. Instructors and counselors in
particular need to make a conscious effort to realize a larger purpose at the community college: to make positive connections with students and serve as transfer agents who provide encouragement as well as access to institutional knowledge that will aid transfer. Community college administrators can also aid this process by consciously hiring and supporting instructors and counselors who uphold the philosophy that they will go beyond teaching and counseling and will encourage, support and guide Latino students through the postsecondary pipeline, as these students currently occupy the most community college seats. Administrators can do more than say they support this transfer agency; they can create opportunities and incentives for teachers and counselors, such as compensation for starting or mentoring a Latino academic club, tutoring, or extra office hours aimed at helping students apply and prepare for transfer to a university. Community college teachers and counselors who go beyond the classroom and the office deserve commendation and compensation.

Lastly, those Latinos who have successfully crossed through the borders of the postsecondary pipeline have an obligation to serve as a resource to other Latinos. The Latino community is an important place of information for students facing the many barriers that come with pursuing higher education in the United States. By serving as role models or mentors to others, Latinos can raise academic expectations within the community and provide referrals to help their fellow Latinos move forward.

IN SUMMARY

It is time for a new and holistic conceptualization of the persistence of first generation Latinos in the postsecondary pipeline. By moving away from Latino educational underachievement and toward Latino success, we can begin to understand how influences like verbal signals, kinship ties, transfer agents, community college campuses, and other everyday encounters can augment social capital, promote social mobility, and clear the path for educational border crossings. As the Latino students in this study demonstrate, there are a number of barriers, but also a number of achievements that coincide with being Latino in the United States. As Trueba (2002) states, “The mastery of different languages, the ability to cross racial and ethnic boundaries, and a general resilience associated with the ability to endure hardships and overcome obstacles will clearly be recognized as a new cultural capital that will be crucial for success” (p. 7). Parallel to this realization of a new definition of
Latino cultural capital is a call to action on the part of parents, teachers, counselors, and Latinos themselves to redefine Latino postsecondary persistence and to reclaim the ideals of a United States that preaches equality for all. For soon, Latinos will no longer be the minority and the social, economic, and moral fabric of the nation is at stake.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER
LATINA/O VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR SDSU RESEARCH STUDY!

YOU:
► Latina/o, Hispanic, Chicana/o, or of other Hispanic or Latino origin
► Have done the majority of your schooling in the US
► Received an Associate’s Degree from a Community College
► Currently enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student in good academic standing at the senior level
  OR graduated with a B.A./B.S. in the last five years
► At least one of your parents was born in a Latin American country
► Parents have little or no college education

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:
The majority of students who start in community colleges never attain a B.A. degree. WHY DID YOU BEAT THE ODDS? This study seeks to identify how factors in the home, in the community college and in your own culture might propel first-generation Latina/o students forward in their studies and help them to persist from community college toward a baccalaureate degree.

WHAT'S INVOLVED?
► A confidential interview that will take approximately 30 - 60 minutes to complete. That’s it!

WHY SHOULD YOU PARTICIPATE?
► Your story will serve as a model to other Latinos
► There is a lack of research on educationally persistent Latinos. Help us tell this story!
► Your identity will be completely protected

CONTACT: Sarah Clinton at: sclinton@projects.sdsu.edu
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
Consent to Participate in Research Study

My name is Sara Clinton and I am a candidate for a Master’s Degree in Latin American Studies at San Diego State University (SDSU). I am conducting research for a thesis titled, “Crossing Borders: The Persistence of First-Generation Latinos in the Postsecondary Pipeline” supervised by Dr. Ramona Pérez, Associate Professor in the Center for Latin American Studies at SDSU.

The purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions among first-generation Latino undergraduate college students of Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican-American or of other Hispanic or Latino origin of their undergraduate collegiate experience. I am interested in where academically successful Latinos encountered support in attending college and who or what influenced them to pursue higher education at the university level.

I will be conducting six - ten interviews. Eligible participants will meet the following criteria:

1. Graduated from a United States high school (either GED or traditional)
2. Transferred from a community college to a four-year university
3. Currently enrolled as full-time undergraduates in good academic standing at the senior level at San Diego State University OR have graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a four-year university within the last five years
4. Self-identify as Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mexican-American or of other Hispanic or Latino origin
5. At least one parent was born in a Latin American country
6. Parents have little or no formal higher education
7. Have done the majority of their schooling in the US.

*Respondents may be of any gender and immigration status is not a factor.

Do you meet all of the criteria? (IF yes, proceed; if No, thank them for their time.)

All interview participants will be asked to share personal information about their education process, their families, and their youth. The interview will take 30 - 60 minutes of your time. Due to the personal nature of some of the questions asked, you may reflect on unpleasant memories while responding to the questionnaire or interview. There is a potential for discomfort and if you begin to feel uncomfortable, you may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently.
There are not direct benefits to you. The intended benefits of this study include an increased understanding of how some Latino students make sense of the fact that they have overcome the statistics against them to obtain a baccalaureate degree, when the majority does not. While there are no direct benefits to you, you may enjoy knowing that this research may help other students and educators.

All names and identities will be kept confidential. You will be assigned a pseudonym by me during the written report and your personal identity will not be revealed. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. All research files (tapes and notes) will be stored in a locked drawer in my personal home office until the data has been uploaded. Only I and my advisor will have access to the files. All interview materials will be shredded after data has been recorded.

You are aware that your participation is voluntary and you will not be paid to participate in this study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with San Diego State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or other negative consequence.

**Contact Information**

If you have any additional questions concerning this study, you may contact me, Sarah Clinton, at 619-569-7869 (cell), or email: sclinton@projects.sdsu.edu, or Dr. Ramona Pérez, SDSU faculty member, at 619-594-1155. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact an IRB representative in the Division of Research Administration at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this consent form. You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.
Signature
Please sign and date below:

_______________________________________________________

Please PRINT your name:

_______________________________________________________

Signature of Sarah Clinton, Project Representative:

_______________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol – Your information will be kept confidential!

“Crossing Borders: The Persistence of First-Generation Latinos in the Postsecondary Pipeline.”

I. Introduction
Thank you for meeting with me today. This interview is part of my master’s thesis research at SDSU. I am examining Latino college students who have started at the community college and have gone on to obtain their BA, or are close to achieving their BA. I chose this research because Latinos are the least likely group to go beyond the two-year community college experience. Much research describes why most Latinos fail, but few scholars have focused on why some Latino college students succeed in obtaining advanced degrees such as the BA. What I’m hoping to do is produce a research project that looks specifically at you and other successful Latinos who have achieved this goal. The purpose of this interview is to document how you might describe your success, and any obstacles or difficulties you have had, in transferring from a community college to a four year university, and in nearing attainment of a baccalaureate degree. Ultimately, I seek to understand how academically successful Latino students make sense of their success. The interview should take 30 – 60 minutes. After we finish today, I will transcribe our interview so I have written documentation of what was said. I will analyze data from all the interviews to look for common themes that represent the opinions and perceptions you and other students share. I will be interviewing 6 – 10 students total. I will keep all information confidential, and I will use pseudonyms in the written document to refer to research participants. Does this sound like something you would like to participate in? (If yes, review consent form; if no, thank them for their time).

II. STUDENT INFORMATION

1. Interviewee Name: ________________ Pseudonym/Code: ___________ Age: __
   Sex/Gender: ___
2. Date/time/location of interview:

3. What is your class level? If, Senior: When will you graduate?
   Date_________________ OR
   If they have you already graduated from a four-year university: When did you
   graduate? Date_________________

4. What is/was your major? __________________________

5. Cumulative GPA at the end of most recent semester: _______

6. What is your ethnicity? __________________________

7. Where were you born? (name country): __________________________

8. Where was your mother born? (name country): __________________________

9. Where was your father born? (name country): __________________________
10. **Your immediate family refers to your closest relatives (your parents, brothers and sisters). Are you the FIRST in your immediate family to attend a four-year university in the U.S.?**
   - YES
   - NO  Who else in your family has attended a four-year university in the US?
   - Did they graduate?: ___________

11. **Growing up, did other family members besides your immediate family (parents and siblings) live in your house?**
   - YES If YES, Who?
     - □ Grandparent(s)
     - □ Aunt(s)/Uncle(s)
     - □ Cousins
     - □ Niece(s)/Nephew(s)
     - □ Other _________________________
   - NO

12. **Where did you complete the majority of your schooling?**
   - In the U.S.
   - In another country: _________________

13. **What is the primary language spoken at home?**
   ___________________________________

14. **Do any of the following describe you? Say ‘yes’ to ALL that apply:**
   - My parents did not have a lot of extra money when I was growing up ___
   - I had trouble with the English language at some point in my schooling _____
   - I went to a low performing high school where very few classmates went on to college ___
   - I received a GED ___
   - I worked/work more than 20 hours per week while school was/is in session ___
   - I had/have a long commute from home to school ____
   - After high school, I took a break in my schooling at least once ____

15. **Did you attend a community college before entering a four-year university?**
    (choose one)
   - YES
   - NO (subject not eligible to participate)

What is the name of the community college?
________________________________________
How many years were you at the community college total?

III. SIGNALS FROM HOME & FAMILY

This study is based on the idea of cultural capital. Cultural capital is the belief that our home and neighborhood environments give us a cultural capital that shapes our beliefs, attitudes, and preferences about life. We then use this capital to operate in society as adults. This study is interested in the cultural capital you acquired at home and in school in the form of attitudes, preferences, behaviors, and knowledge towards school while you were growing up. The following questions should help you think back to the cultural capital that you acquired from your family as it relates to your school life.

1. While you were growing up, did you receive signals at home that education was important?
2.
3. How were your grades from elementary to high school?
4.
5. How about your friends growing up. Were they good students?
6. Did your parents regularly help you with your homework?
7. Do you feel your parents were involved in your education (asked about your grades, attended parent-teacher conferences, helped with etc.)?
8. Some families value work and income more than education and some families put education at the top of their priorities. At other times, the value may be high but circumstances make it difficult to obtain. Would you tell me about your family? Was work or education the priority?
9. Did your parents help you pay for college?
10. When it comes to college, have you had to figure things out on your own? Or, did your parents possess the knowledge to help you navigate though college?

IV. COMMUNITY COLLEGE – Signals From Personnel

Now let’s think back to your community college days.

1. Did you regularly meet with transfer counselors at your community college?
2. Did you regularly speak with teachers and instructors at your community college?
3. Did you participate in transfer fairs and/or university visits organized by your community college?

4. Was staff at your community college accessible and available to help you with questions regarding your transfer from community college to a four-year university?

5. Were you a member of any community college student transfer support programs like the Puente Program, TRIO Program or Upward Bound?

   If YES, describe the program and whether or not it helped you transfer.

V. TRANSFER AGENTS

There is an idea that students who transfer from community college to a four-year university were helped along the way by a “transfer agent” at the community college level. A transfer agent can be a teacher, a counselor, mentor or any other authority figure at the community college that helps students navigate college, develop a sense of belonging in college, and overcome barriers to their educational success. Transfer agents play an important part in helping students transfer from community college to a four-year university.

1. Do you feel you had a “transfer agent” at your community college?

   IF YES, what was their title at the community college?
   IF YES, was your transfer agent Hispanic or Latino?
   IF NO, skip to Section VI.

2. Describe your transfer agent. How did they help you?

VI. OVERALL REASONS FOR YOUR SUCCESS

This study seeks to understand the on-campus and off-campus factors contributing to Latino student persistence from family upbringing to community college to graduation from a four-year university.

1. In this interview, we’ve discussed four factors that may have contributed to your postsecondary success: the values toward school gained from your family and your upbringing; participation in transfer success programs at the community college level; a transfer agent at community college; and the community college personnel in general. Of these factors, which was the MOST important in leading you to transfer from a community college to a four-year university? Please only select ONE and describe why.

2. In your opinion, how can community college counselors, staff and instructors improve the likelihood of Latino transfer from community colleges to a four-year university?
3. Overall, what was the biggest factor, besides your own personal ambition, contributing to your academic success?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
APPENDIX D

RESEARCHER FIELDNOTE TEMPLATE
Interview Fieldnotes – Sarah Clinton

Interviewee Name: ____________________________________________

Pseudonym: _________________________________________________

Date and time of interview: _________________________________

Key Points:

Interesting Quotes:

Overall Observations:

Post-interview Reflections: