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Marisa Saunders and Irene Serna
Journal of Hispanic Higher Education 2004 3: 146
DOI: 10.1177/1538192703262515

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What is This?
Making College Happen: The College Experiences of First-Generation Latino Students

MARISA SAUNDERS
IRENE SERNA

Abstract: This article documents the experiences of a group of first-generation Latino college students who enrolled in 4-year institutions immediately after high school graduation. Students form part of a research intervention program that focuses on disrupting social reproduction by increasing college access and persistence for underrepresented youth. In particular, this article explores the long-term effects of a college access/intervention program by examining how a group of first-generation Latino college students navigate the transition from high school to college, maintain a capacity to access academic and social support while in college, and sustain a college-going identity. The experiences of these first-generation Latino college students are situated within social/cultural capital theory, social reproduction theory, and critical theory. Analysis of a longitudinal database focuses on students' proclivity to mobilize support around academic, financial, personal, and family issues while embedded within the college milieu.

Resumen: Este manuscrito documenta las experiencias de un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de primera generación que se inscribieron en instituciones universitarias de 4 años inmediatamente después de graduarse de preparatoria. Los estudiantes forman parte de un programa de investigación e intervención que se enfoca en la disrupción de la reproducción social a través del incremento al acceso universitario y la persistencia de juventud con representación universitaria mínima. En particular, este manuscrito explora los efectos de largo plazo de un programa de acceso e intervención: examinando cómo un grupo de estudiantes Latinos universitarios de primera generación navegan la transición de preparatoria a universidad, mantienen la capacidad de acceso de apoyo social y académico, y conservan una identidad universitaria. Las experiencias de estos estudiantes universitarios Latinos de primera generación se sitúan dentro de una teoría social y de capital cultural, teoría de reproducción social, y teoría crítica. El análisis de la fuente de datos longitudinal se enfoca en la tendencia de los estudiantes a movilizar apoyo académico, financiero, personal, y familiar al estar dentro del medio ambiente universitario.

DOI: 10.1177/1538192703262515
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I always knew I would graduate from high school, but when I got accepted to a 4-year university, I found out that it might not happen. I began slacking off in my academic coursework because I was scared of going away and being on my own [and] not having anyone there I was comfortable with or trustworthy that would help me.

—Latino college student

Less than 43% of Hispanic high school students are qualified to enroll in 4-year institutions. Of those who qualify to attend, approximately 40% will enroll in college immediately after high school graduation (National Center for Education Statistics quoted in President’s Advisory Commission, 2003). However, a large percentage will leave college without a degree (Tinto, 1993). In fact, only about 10% of Hispanic Americans currently graduate from 4-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics quoted in President’s Advisory Commission, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). In an attempt to ameliorate this situation, there has been a significant increase in the development and expansion of high school intervention or college access programs throughout the country. Unfortunately, most of these programs end when students graduate from high school (Gándara & Bial, 2001), and few of these programs ensure that qualified high school graduates enroll in college; neither do they offer transitional support for those who do. This article explores the long-term effects of a college access/intervention program—the Futures Project—by examining how a group of first-generation Latino college students navigated the transition from high school to college, maintain a capacity to access academic and social support while in college, and sustain a college-going identity.

Social Capital Theory and First-Generation Latino College Students

This article situates the experiences of first-generation Latino college students participating in the Futures Project within social/cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), social reproduction theory (MacLeod, 1987), and critical theory. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is measured in the amount of resources that “are ranked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, in other words, to membership in a group” (p. 248). He argued that the volume of the social capital possessed depends on the size of the network of connections individuals can mobilize and on the volume of the capital (be it economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed by those to whom one is connected. Portes (1998) further argued that
social networks must be constructed through investment strategies aimed at institutionalizing group relations. Maintenance of those relationships allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their colleagues and to the amount and quality of those resources. In education, students with limited capital benefit from the development of relationships with caring educated adults. Students benefit from the social connections they establish with teachers, counselors, and school officials. According to Valenzuela (1999),

Positive social relations at school are highly productive because they allow for the accumulation of social capital that can then be converted into socially valued resources or opportunities (e.g., good grades, a high school diploma, access to privileged information, etc.). (p. 28)

Stanton-Salazar (1997) emphasized those forms of support that cultivate the ability to manage “stressful borders and institutional barriers” (p. 26). Connections with caring adults within the school environment lead many “low-status youth” to academically succeed in school and apply to college because these adults act as bridges (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). In addition, it is these social connections, participation in activities, involvement, and roles that foster the development of a similar goal orientation or pro-school ethos. That is, it is through access to these social networks that students not only acquire the skills and knowledge to qualify for and consider college but also begin to accommodate a college-going identity.

A number of studies cite the importance of cultural capital—knowledge to access opportunities (Lareau, 1989)—and social capital as key attributes in accessing college. A study conducted by Perna (2000) compares the college enrollment decisions of African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites using an econometric model of college enrollment that includes measures of social and cultural capital. This study found that Hispanics are as likely as Whites to enroll in a 4-year college or university after adding measures of social and cultural capital to controls for gender, costs, benefits, financial resources, and ability. In other words, the low college enrollment rates of Hispanics may be attributed to lower levels of access to the types of capital required for college enrollment. In fact, for Hispanics (and African Americans), social and cultural capital is as important as academic ability in the college enrollment decision. The Futures Project sought to assist underrepresented youth in the development and accrual of the social capital necessary to apply to, enroll in, and succeed in college.

For 4 years, Futures students participated in a variety of activities intent on providing resources, relationships, and information critical for college preparation: mentoring, counseling, academic tutoring, assistance with class scheduling, college field trips, parent information sessions, and assistance with college applications and financial aid. Futures added to these activities
a curriculum that focused on educational equity and access. During the course of the school year and through their participation in summer programs, students became involved in academically rigorous research seminars that introduced them to the field of sociology of education. Through this type of involvement, students availed themselves to an elaborate support system—peer advising, peer research interest groups, skill-building workshops, and research presentations. Research participation affects student retention (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998) and provides access to an intricate social network. Students developed relationships with high school personnel as well as university professors, graduate students, and community members. Engagement in research focusing on equity and access issues also afforded students an opportunity to understand and internalize the social situation of minorities in the United States and successfully resist the internalization of negative portrayals that are often assigned to their ethnic/racial group (Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2001). It is within the Futures Project that marginalized youth developed and demonstrated the skills and competencies needed for college access while also acquiring a critical perspective of schools as potentially dominant and oppressive structures. Underrepresented youth were given the tools and the space to question the cultural processes that advantage some and disadvantage others. Through these research opportunities, Futures participants began to view themselves as “intellectuals,” and a college-going identity was further developed.

As first-generation Latino college students make the transition from high school to college, a reconfiguration of relationships and constructive social ties transpires. The process of reconfiguration is the focus of this article. Although this longitudinal research is still in progress, more than 2 full years since the participants’ high school graduation, emergent findings make clear that participation in the program and engagement in equity and access research has assisted a number of these students in maintaining a college-going identity. Similarly, emergent findings reveal that the social capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999) acquired through Futures has helped a number of first-generation Latino college students negotiate the process of degree attainment at the university level. However, as this article will illuminate, not all first-generation Latino college students demonstrate the same facility in using and maintaining this capital, notwithstanding their shared experiences in a college access/intervention program.

Method

Data used for this article are part of a larger, longitudinal database and study currently in its 6th year (1998 to the present). The first-generation Latino college students featured in this article form a subset of a larger group of
30 predominantly Latino and African American students involved with the project since its inception. Futures participants all attended the same public, comprehensive high school located in Southern California. The high school serves a diverse population (47% White, 33% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 7% Asian/Asian American) and touts a laudable University of California/California State University eligibility rate. Although the focal high school sends a large group of graduates to some of the nation’s most prestigious universities, another group of students at the school—divided by race and class lines—fares far less well. The Futures Project was born out of these differences. The 30 Futures students had mediocre prospects for completing high school, poor chances to qualify for and enter a 4-year college, and unimaginable prospects for participation in a college program leading to a bachelor’s degree. For example, of the 361 African American, Latino, and Native American students who enrolled as ninth graders in the fall of 1996, only 72% graduated and only 20% was eligible for 4-year colleges and universities. However, 82% of the White and Asian population graduated, and 56% of this population was eligible for 4-year colleges and universities (UC ACCORD Indicators Project, 2003).

Data collected about students and their families over the past few years offer a detailed picture of high school and the transition to college viewed through the eyes of the researchers’ and students’ critical lenses. Post–high school data collection includes quantitative data detailing students’ course-taking patterns, grades, and student work as well as qualitative data pertaining to college experiences. Interviews have been conducted with students biennially, focusing on their challenges and adjustments within the college setting. Interviews also addressed participation in college outreach programs, immediate and future plans, goals for continuing with postgraduate work, and social justice activism. Through the use of semistructured interview protocols, students are also asked to reflect on their high school experiences and, in particular, their participation in the Futures Project and project-related activities. An extensive database that extends back to these years of reflection provides an opportunity for triangulation. In addition to one-on-one interviews, qualitative data are collected through focus groups, cyberspace communication, and written reflections.

Observational data of students have provided an opportunity to examine the students’ social context firsthand within the college milieu and establish a clearer understanding of the pathways they have navigated since high school. Such observations take place every time they are visited by research team members, that is, approximately 2 to 3 times a year. Post–high school interviews and observations are conducted by researchers who have been involved with the project for a considerable length of time (at least 1 year). Although new researchers have joined the team at different stages in the project’s history, new team members have been slow and deliberate about con-
ducting one-on-one interviews and observations: A sense of familiarity and trust must first be established between researcher and participant.

Eight of the 10 Latino Futures college students enrolled at nonlocal 4-year institutions post–high school graduation. A group of 4 first-generation Latino college students, along with 1 African American participant, currently attend the same nonlocal 4-year institution. Nine of the 10 students persist at their institutions and are currently in their 3rd year. The group of 10 includes 4 males and 6 females. Three students are first generation in the United States, 6 are second generation, and 1 is third generation or beyond in the United States. Of the 3 foreign-born students, 2 completed some schooling in their countries of origin. These students were assessed as English proficient before or during middle school. Hence, no students were enrolled in English language development classes or received instruction in a language other than English during high school or their involvement in the project. The students all share working-class backgrounds, and parent level of education compares across the group (no parents completed an education beyond high school). A number of students have parents with limited English skills. Finally, 7 of the students are the first born in their families. Therefore, not only are these students members of the first generation in their families to attend college, but they are the first in their immediate families to pursue higher education.²

The Experiences of Latino College Students

When I was in high school, I got a lot of bad grades because I let problems interfere with my learning. I don’t want to deal with that again. I’m trying to be a new person, and I don’t want to go back to [how] I used to be. I think [the change] was gradual. I was the first to actually come to a 4-year university, and the fact that every time I go home, everybody in my family, my mom, everybody, “Oh, we’re so proud of you”—that sets off in the back of my mind, like I’m not only doing it for myself but for my family. I don’t feel like that’s a bad thing. (Lisa, Latina college student)

Analysis of these data show how the critical consciousness as well as “social capital” gained through the Futures Project has shaped first-generation Latino college students’ experiences and has influenced the way in which they have navigated their entrance into the college system. Equally, analysis of the data collected thus far calls into question how well first-generation Latino college students are able to carry over the capital they have gained via their participation in a high school college access program. Although some Latino students have succeeded academically in their 1st and 2nd year of college, others have struggled. We must question whether and how academic achievement, and ultimately degree attainment, is influenced by the ability to maintain/acquire capital in the college environment.
Each of the 10 first-generation Latino college students created his or her unique academic trajectory, as expected. Students owned their particular familial experiences, history, immigrant status, and so forth. These diverse experiences and characteristics in terms of background, abilities, and opportunities affected the choices made after high school and continue to do so for this group. During their college years, students have been and will continue to be exposed to a number of opportunities that influence their future and create divergent pathways. First-generation Latino students attending 4-year institutions must deal with a number of issues that influence and affect degree attainment (Nagda et al., 1998; Nora, 1987). These experiences are divided among family, financial, social, critical, and interpersonal contexts (Hurtado, 1992; Solorzano, 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Data reveal that students deal with these opportunities, issues, and experiences in their own ways. However, their shared experiences as Futures students provided them the opportunity and space to acquire and maintain a set of tools, relationships, and a social network meant to assist them in gaining entry to college, to make the transition from high school to college, and to deal with new issues and experiences within the college environment. Once situated in the college setting, first-generation Latino college students have differed in their ability to maintain these tools, resources, and relationships; reconfigure these relationships; and/or create new ones. As such, first-generation Latino college students differ in their ability to deal with issues that may influence and impact degree attainment. Of particular interest is how these students draw from cultural, social, and critical awareness of the college reality as a means of circumventing obstacles and becoming a part of the college milieu.

We found that the behavior of most first-generation Latino students attending 4-year institutions fell under three categories. One group of 6 students demonstrated that they were proficient at reconfiguring old and create new social networks, establishing new ones, and seeking resources and assistance to ensure their continued academic success. A second group, composed of 3 students, demonstrated an ability and readiness to maintain old relationships, networks, and resources but were not adept at establishing new resources to ensure their continued academic success. Finally, 1 student was unable to create or maintain ties to any social network. This analysis focuses on students’ proclivity to mobilize support around academic, financial, personal, and family issues.

**Type 1: The Creation of New Networks and the Maintenance of the Old**

Roberto’s transition to college provides an example from the first category of behaviors: an ability to reconfigure old and create new social networks. Roberto enrolled in a private school away from home after high school graduation. He made use of old and new social networks to remain...
enrolled in school while dealing with his immigration status and related difficulties. That is, forced by the fact that his green card was not issued during the expected time frame, he left his university to return home and enroll in the local community college until he became eligible, once again, for financial assistance at his 4-year institution. Roberto made specific arrangements with university counselors (with whom he had developed relationships) and community college counselors to ensure that the classes he took would transfer. Roberto did not feel the need to contact his “old network” (i.e., Futures contacts) to seek guidance or advice to guarantee the transfer took place without altering his ultimate goal of degree attainment. In addition, Roberto, with the assistance and/or advice of individuals from his “new network,” determined that leaving his 4-year institution (albeit on a temporary basis) was the best strategy to deal with his ineligibility for financial assistance. Although Roberto and other members of this group freely contact individuals from the Futures Project to discuss issues or to touch base, they do not exhibit a need for solutions from members of the old network.

Roberto, like others demonstrating these behaviors, benefited from attending a small 4-year institution and, as such, did not experience hardships in creating relationships with other students, academic counselors, and professors or in becoming members of academic organizations, community organizations, and social groups. Academic counselors know these students and are aware of the academic progress they are (or are not) making. Lisa, for example, fell ill and was hospitalized during a visit with her family back home. Realizing she would be unable to return to her university and attend classes for a length of time, she relied primarily on college counselors to assist her in negotiating continued course enrollment. Amado, attending a small satellite campus of a large, out-of-state institution, also benefited from the structure of a small university. With the guidance of counselors, he successfully made the transfer to the larger campus, where he would gain from an enhanced selection of courses, opportunities, and the school’s reputation.

Interview data reveal that students demonstrating this type of behavior not only have dealt with issues regarding academic standing and/or financial assistance but have had to grapple with a number of personal issues, such as difficult breakups or the death of a friend or family member. Although these participants do not recruit project personnel to find solutions, seek advice, or find solace, they do identify co-Futures members as an important resource and as a source of comfort. Although these students have worked to make new friends and networks, they maintain strong ties with each other. One Latina student stated,

"It’s pretty nice because you know that if something happens, they’ll be there to tell you, “You can do it.” Even though we don’t see each other every day—we have new friends, and you have your own social gathering plans, and you go out
[with your new friends]—when we see each other, we’re like, “Oh, my God! Hi. How are you? How are classes?” It’s pretty nice. You know there’s someone else here that knows where you’re coming from. (Nereyda, Latina college student)

Students demonstrating these behaviors benefit from others’ knowledge base and experiences as well as from a shared base of knowledge and experience.

These 6 students demonstrated the ability to deal with issues by seeking assistance from their new networks and reconfiguring old relationships. In addition, these students continue to acknowledge Futures for the development of valuable skills leading to current opportunities:

That type of exposure really helped me to learn about the [college application] process, financial aid, and activities. The presentations we did on the research projects at UCLA [were also helpful]. I think that did help because through our presentations, I wasn’t just able to learn how research works and how to do research, but I was also able to develop my public speaking skills. Thanks to those things, I met a lot of people in college that are now helping me out. This lady came up to me yesterday. She saw one of my presentations, she recognized me, and she offered me a job. (Roberto, Latino college student)

Roberto’s stated connection between research and opportunity is supported by others. The research of Nagda et al. (1998) addresses the importance of involving college students in research projects that become an integral part of the students’ academic life. Research involvement provides access to a social network built on research interests, skill-building workshops, and research presentations (Nagda et al., 1998). The Futures Project’s particular orientation to this approach continues to support students’ development, as Roberto communicated. Futures participants not only are provided occasion to act as research assistants or mentors (through summer programs held at UCLA) but are encouraged to pursue their own research endeavors and interests. Although a varied assemblage of Futures students have presented annually, since their senior year in high school, at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, these students maintain ties to the old network to ensure their continued involvement in such valued activities.

Finally, some members of this group have actively participated in the creation of new networks with an emphasis on social justice issues. Nereyda, for instance, not only became embedded in a new social circle and environment at her university but decided to initiate the development of new sources of support at school and in her home community. Taking advantage of the social, academic, research, and intellectual networks she acquired during her participation in the high school college access project, she developed new networks at her school and local community.
I had the responsibility of having a club. I was helping to get the class started, the class for students like [Chicano] literature and then incorporate it into art, graffiti art, and stuff like that. That was inside the school. Outside of school, I had people from my hometown, from Oaxaca, dependent on [me]. Students from Oaxaca could [provide] outreach to other students that are barely coming in [and act] like a guide for them. That helped me out a lot to know that there are other people that could help you and that you can help people out.

Nereyda has used her knowledge and social connections to assist others. Another student, Sandra, continued to tap into the critical knowledge she acquired while participating in the Futures Project. Sandra approached individuals at her university and neighboring high schools to increase outreach efforts to minority students. Like Nereyda, Sandra felt a social responsibility toward underrepresented youth; thus, she assisted in developing a college outreach program at a local high school.

Since I was younger, I’ve always been the type of person that noticed race. I always notice how different things [are] with different people. Futures made me aware of what’s going on around me, how education affects everybody, and everybody’s getting different things from that. Because of the research that I did and everything that I got to learn, it made me more aware of why I need to be successful [and] how to maybe fix it. I wouldn’t have done [this] if I didn’t know about it. I see the importance of why I’m here. (Sandra, Latina college student)

Simultaneously, work with the community has prepared these students for other opportunities. The experiences gained in creating these networks led to Nereyda’s current position as a mentor for first-time students at the university.

**Type 2: Relying on Old Networks**

The second type of behaviors is exhibited by a group of students who also persist in the college environment but have not experienced the same success in creating new social networks and relationships and accessing new resources. These students continue to rely heavily on their old networks and resources (e.g., the Futures Project) to confront current issues. Carola, for example, attending a local private institution, made the decision to take a leave from school to take care of financial and familial responsibilities. Unlike Roberto, she hesitated to seek assistance from her university to ensure an uncomplicated return. Counseled and encouraged by members of her old network, she finally sought the necessary information and help from her university to make sure classes taken at a local community college would transfer and reenrollment could take place the following semester. Like other students demonstrating this type of behavior, Carola did not hesitate to access
old resources and networks but has yet to achieve success in mobilizing support, information, and/or resources in her current setting.

These Latino first-generation students claim to have knowledge of available resources available to them in the college environment. They acknowledge, however, their inability or antipathy to tap into these resources. Delia, for example, on academic probation at a local California State University, was asked why she had not sought any assistance in the form of tutoring programs available at the university. “They do [have tutoring]. I just haven’t researched it, but I know they do. The [counselors] told me.” Delia also discussed the difficulties she has experienced in the past (although she acknowledged receiving helpful information once sought) and her lack of connection to the individuals who are meant to assist her.

I just keep putting it off, and I’ve written it in my organizer and I just . . . for some strange reason, I just don’t end up going [to the counseling office]. But I do need to go there. When I have gone in previous semesters, I have received a lot of help, especially with my classes and, like, guidance, you know, just telling me what I should do and stuff like that. It’s just at random; whoever [counselor] has an open spot I get. I’ve just been getting thrown around. (Delia, Latina college student)

Students demonstrating this mode of behavior rely on constant contact via telephone and/or e-mail communication with their old network. Participants seek answers and/or advice to deal with academic issues, difficult financial situations, family/personal problems, relationship difficulties, and so forth. These students, like individuals exhibiting Type 1 behaviors, continue to experience a number of difficult life issues and situations. One student, who attended college locally, experienced the death of a good friend during her 1st year of college. Another student was a new father and was struggling to balance familial responsibilities and his academic endeavors. Although these students persist at 4-year institutions, they have relied heavily on the assistance of adults involved with Futures to assist in these difficult situations and to minimize distractions from the goal of degree attainment.

Unlike students who demonstrate the first type of behavior, Type 2 students do not tend to view other Futures participants as resources, and most communication is made to adults/researchers involved with the project rather than with fellow participants. Although these students appreciate gatherings with co-Futures participants, they do not seek the companionship, advice, and/or guidance of their Futures peers:

I know that personal problems have a huge impact on your academics and your life. Although I am happy to hear that I am not the only one that is going through these problems, it is still hard to hear that people have all these problems. Every
time that I come away from these get-togethers [Futures gatherings], I come away with more hope for myself. (Carola, Latina college student)

I feel I have somewhat of a second family with Futures. I felt like I was in high school again, which was a pretty good feeling. When we were all talking, it made me feel pretty good because I haven’t been in such a big group that I felt so good and comfortable in. (Delia, Latina college student)

The fact that two of the students who relied on the old network chose to attend colleges locally may play a role in the difficulties they experienced in balancing multiple responsibilities and seeking new means of tending to these responsibilities. Attending college (even a local university) represents a separation from the home and the family for all these young Latinos, but those closer to home experienced this separation differently. Although these students acknowledged that their parents and/or other family members cannot provide them with the necessary information and resources to assist them in the process of college attainment and persistence, maintaining family relationships is critical as they pursue their academic endeavors. In fact, research by Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) shows that for Latino students attending college full-time, maintaining family relationships is among the most important contributing factors facilitating adjustment to college. Futures participants demonstrated similar adjustment needs. For all of them, the family is a source of strength and comfort, particularly when parents offer and give support to “go on and pursue an education.” However, for those remaining close to home, it is a constant and different type of struggle to balance the everyday needs of the family with the pressures of being a full-time student.

They don’t know what’s going on. They don’t know that I haven’t been doing too good. They’re interested, they just don’t know . . . like I’ve always done good and they didn’t have to ask me how . . . just check up on me, you know, how are you doing? Good. OK, that’s it. And they get the good report card. They still think I’m going the same path, so they just ask me and do the checkups, but if they knew, then they’d be all over me. It’s not as though they’re not interested, but they’re just doing what they’ve always done, and it’s always worked out until now, and they don’t know that it’s not working out. (Delia, Latina college student)

Delia expressed her constant frustration with the fact that her parents “don’t get it.” She shared her regret for not taking the opportunity to study away from home immediately after high school.

**Type 3: All Alone**

Carmen was unable to either maintain old or create new networks to successfully navigate her 1st year in college. Carmen failed academically,
struggled socially, and sought no assistance to prevent expulsion from her university. She returned home during her sophomore year to attend the local community college with the hope of improving her grades and eventually enrolling at another 4-year university. However, she was confronted with some new and old issues:

The transition from state university to [the local community college] was a very difficult one and a very surprising one. When I got there, I was excited because I was back home, and I wanted to start my life again, back where I left off, and it just wasn’t like that. . . . A lot of [personal] issues came back. (Carmen, Latina college student)

Although there are a number of circumstances surrounding Carmen’s experience in high school and within the college environment, unlike her Latino Futures peers who attended 4-year colleges after high school graduation, she felt ill-equipped and without the resources to persist at her 4-year institution. Ultimately, she described her feelings of disconnect to the Futures Project—the old network:

I [felt] stuck with the same group of people my whole 4 years [of high school]. I’m just very honest. I want to [be involved] because I’m selfish now, and I want to look after myself, and I want something I could put on my résumé when I go to UCLA hopefully or go to a different [University of California campus]. But I don’t want to see any of those people again, you know, like . . . I don’t, you know. (Carmen, Latina college student)

Carmen’s lack of trust in the project, with her peers, and with adults associated with the project led to her inability or lack of ambition to contact the old network as she experienced academic and personal problems. Furthermore, she demonstrated no capacity or want to mobilize a new source of assistance.

In a study examining the formation of social capital among low-income Mexican-origin adolescents, Stanton-Salazar (2001) explored the complexities of a network orientation (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). Defined as a “complex constellation of dispositions and skills related to network-building and adaptation to environmental demands, stressors, and opportunities,” Stanton-Salazar (2001, p. 24) paid particular attention to the developing “help-seeking” orientation or proclivity to resolve issues through the mobilization of relationships and networks. For Mexican youth in particular, Stanton-Salazar found that the development of a help-seeking orientation depends on social constructs of trust experienced within particular interpersonal relationships and reciprocity set in the context of trusting relationships.9 He found that the maintenance of these trust norms are frequently undermined by a combination of structural and assimilationist forces operating within institutional contexts. Within
schools, Stanton-Salazar found that students’ help-seeking orientation, as well as the structure and culture of the school, was a principal factor in the likelihood of a student establishing trust relationships and mobilizing different forms of support. For students who effectively mobilized support, it was not about network building or accessing social capital but finding a space where the need to self-protect and guard one’s self-esteem was not a main concern. This space, unfortunately, was never created for Carmen. However, Carmen has begun to display interest and initiative in communicating and sharing with Futures research team members and coparticipants. Carmen is applying to colleges and plans on returning to a 4-year institution by the fall of 2004.

Discussion

The distinct behaviors students apply to address academic, financial, personal, and family issues and responsibilities that arise once immersed in the college setting elicit a number of questions. Primarily, is there a relationship between the academic achievements of these students and the behaviors they exhibit in dealing with new issues and seeking new resources? On average, students demonstrating Type 1 and Type 2 behaviors have achieved comparably academically. The students who have succeeded in creating new networks have achieved a mean grade point average of 2.84 compared to a mean grade point average of 2.59 earned by students who continue to rely heavily on their old networks. Carmen earned a lower cumulative grade point average of 2.18. Furthermore, students who have demonstrated a facility in creating new networks and/or maintaining ties to old networks all persist in the college environment and steadily make their way toward degree attainment. Nonetheless, students exhibiting the first type of behaviors demonstrate a sense of comfort and confidence in their new environment, and their identity as college-going individuals is reaffirmed within the institutions they attend. These students are secure enough to seek support and assistance from others within this setting. In contrast, it is not clear how far the students exhibiting Type 2 behaviors would proceed without the continued support of the project. These students continue to seek assistance, support, and affirmation of their college-going identity from old networks. For this second group of students, there is a sense or need to stay within a zone of comfort and a lack of interest or trust in examining other terrain. (Perhaps this tendency played a role in the decision made by a couple of individuals to attend colleges nearby rather than away from home.) Finally, students relying solely on the old network are not involved in social justice activities to the extent of the first group. For many of the first-generation Latino students who have been able to create new networks and simultaneously rely on old networks, improving the educational opportunities of other minority students has been incorporated into the college experience.
The ability of first-generation Latino college students to create, negotiate, and sustain social networks influences the college experience. The fact that an old network to access is available to all these students is critical. The experiences and behaviors of these first-generation Latino students speak to the importance of providing the tools to underrepresented youth and of ensuring that students have continued access beyond high school. Even beyond high school graduation and college acceptance, the need for caring and nurturing relationships between students and knowledgeable adults plainly exists. However, there is no way of ensuring all students will choose to access, in some form or capacity, available networks. Carmen’s experiences speak to this.

In addition to one’s ability to mobilize support, we can argue that a number of other factors are at work in influencing participants’ success in the college setting. Clearly, academic preparation plays a role. Studies of college persistence rates have focused on the completion of a rigorous course of study in high school. A consistent advantage is experienced by students who complete rigorous high school curricula and, to a lesser extent, by those completing midlevel curricula over their peers completing core curricula or lower (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). In addition, success is influenced by the structure of the current system or environment in which they are embedded. Studies of college persistence (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000) examine how different pedagogies within the college setting influence persistence rates. A pedagogy that infuses a sense of trust or community may assist Latino first-generation students in the college environment. For example, first-generation Latino Futures students attending private and/or smaller universities are doing better (in terms of grade point averages) than those attending large, public institutions. Although many factors may be at play here, it does remain clear that underrepresented youth must be given opportunities to learn how to mobilize individual and institutional support—this needs to be incorporated into a college access curriculum. Finally, students are continuously making meaning of the tools provided them through their participation in Futures. The reconfiguration of social ties and networks will continue over time. Carmen’s experience is illustrative of this point. Her story is still in the making, as are the stories of all Futures students.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis reveals the ways in which Latino students, participating in a college access project, navigate 4-year colleges. Our findings emphasize the importance of expanding the services of high school college access programs through college. For the most part, researchers have been as neglectful of this gap as have intervention programs, and the field has typically framed college access and college retention research as distinct and discrete.
fields of study. Consequently, we cannot disentangle whether, how, or to what degree various programs enhance students’ actual success in college. Furthermore, although researchers have some understanding of the characteristics and problems associated with college preparation programs (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Tierney, Colyar, & Corwin, 2003), they have generated little knowledge about helping students follow college access through degree attainment. Without longitudinal studies that follow students from high school through college, very little information can be fed back to the K-12 system and to college access programs to make them more responsive to students’ needs. Our analysis speaks to the importance of fostering spaces for critique and resistance to developing the critical consciousness and the tools necessary to disrupt prevailing patterns of social reproduction within postsecondary institutions.

Notes

1. “First-generation Latino college student” refers to participants’ college-going attendance and not generational status in the United States. These students all are members of the first generation in their families to attend college. Not all participants of the Futures Project identified as Latino. Twenty of the 30 Futures participants were Latino. Latino students were of Mexican and Central American descent.

2. This article focuses on 10 Latino students who enrolled in 4-year institutions after high school graduation. Although the focus is on the experiences of first-generation Latino college students attending 4-year institutions, it is critical to point out that the experiences of first-generation Latino students attending community colleges are of extreme importance and play a significant role in understanding how students navigate their way to degree attainment (8 Futures participants are currently navigating their way into 4-year institutions from community colleges). However, this article could not adequately address the decision-making process that led individual students to attend a community college and the experiences of transferring to 4-year institutions.

3. The study uses data from the third (1994) follow-up to the National Educational Longitudinal Study. The “social and cultural capital” variable is defined by examining high school quality (number of high school graduates enrolled in 4-year colleges), high school desegregation (in which African Americans and Hispanics make up more than 60% of all students), high school region, high school location (urban vs. rural), public versus private status of high school, educational expectations, parental encouragement, parental involvement in the student’s education, parent’s level of education, encouragement from peers, encouragement from school personnel, and use of tools to prepare for college admissions tests.

4. One student identified as a Pacific Islander.

5. Futures participants were not enrolled in the college-bound track when they entered high school. Some were not expected to graduate at all; notwithstanding, of the 30 students who entered Futures as 10th graders in 1998, 25 were accepted to 4-year universities in 2001, 16 (10 Latinos and 6 African Americans) enrolled in 4-year universities in the fall, 9 (7 Latinos, 2 African Americans) enrolled in community colleges, 2 (1 Latina and 1 African American) enrolled in trade school, 2 (1 African American and 1 Pacific Islander) entered the workplace, and 1 (Latino) joined the military.

6. Most members of the research team have been involved with the project since its inception.

7. Only one student has older siblings that have pursued or are pursuing a college education.
8. Reference to “new networks” in this article includes relationships with individuals in the college setting: professors, academic counselors, coaches, mentors, friends, social group members, and other colleagues. “Old network” refers to the Futures team, Futures participants, and other individuals (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors) with whom the participant had a relationship prior to high school graduation.

9. Stanton-Salazar (2001) referred to these trust norms as *confianza*. *Confianza*, as defined by Stanton-Salazar, is a social construct that allows for vulnerability among individuals, an ability to share intimacies, and the engagement of important transactions without worry of being deceived.

**References**


Marisa Saunders is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include the academic success of underrepresented youth, equity issues, and college access.

Irene Serna is a visiting assistant professor in education at Whittier College and a research associate at the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is interested in college access, changing demographics, and teacher preparation.