



## Aspirational and High-Achieving Latino College Men Who Strive “Por Mi Madre”: Toward a Proposed Model of Maternal Cultural Wealth

Dr. Tracy Arámbula Ballysingh, University of Vermont



■ The extant body of work pertaining to Latinx<sup>1</sup> postsecondary experiences highlights lingering gaps in recruitment, matriculation, retention, and persistence, despite efforts to ameliorate these challenges (Núñez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers & Vásquez, 2013). Only 15% of Latinx students aged 25 to 29 years hold a bachelor’s degree, making them the lowest age-group degree earners (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015). In addition, while Latinxs have improved matriculation rates at less selective institutions, representation within social capital-bearing elite institutions remains stagnant (Ashkenas, Park & Pearce, 2017). This article presents findings from a qualitative study of Latinos attending a selective public flagship institution in the Southwest. A direct response to deficit narratives focused on underachievement, this article advances an asset-based perspective of maternal influence on college-going behavior using Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to answer the following question: In what ways do Latino men attending a selective public flagship institution attribute their motivation to persist to and through postsecondary education to their mothers?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Latinxs endure unique challenges in K-12 settings, including cultural incongruence, low teacher expectations, racism, low self-efficacy, decreased rigor, tracking, and low postsecondary matriculation rates (N. E. Hill & Torres, 2010). Challenges that occur on the college campus relate to campus climate (Cabrera & Hurtado, 2015; Kiyama, Museus & Vega, 2015), belongingness (Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2017), transition and

adjustment (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012), familial obligations, financial constraints (Witkow, Huynh & Fuligni, 2015), weak institutional attachment, and personal, emotional, academic, and social adjustment (Credé & Niehorster, 2012). Other factors might explain the Latino attainment gap, including cultural and familial expectations to provide (Sáenz, de las Mercédez, Rodriguez & Garcia-Louis, 2017), organizational over-involvement, insufficient academic preparation, internalized coping strategies, and weak support infrastructure (Rodriguez, Lu & Bukoski, 2016).

College completion is essential to achieve the promise of advanced study, employment, earnings, job satisfaction, civic participation, and life satisfaction (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005). Low-income and racially minoritized students matriculate less to selective institutions due to “undermatching” and lose the corresponding benefits, including access to alumni networks, prestige, and financial rewards (A. Harris, 2018). Latinx students are affected by this most starkly (Kang & Torres, 2018), with six-year graduation rates at 28 percentage points lower than racial counterparts.

Latinx parents value academic achievement. Contrary to persistent deficit ideation, families feature prominently in Latino matriculation and persistence (Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake & Guida, 2018) through sacrifice (Matos, 2015), physical resources, emotional support, interpersonal interaction, school involvement, and funds of knowledge that promote educational ideologies for college access (Kiyama, 2010).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework promotes a strengths-based approach, positing that six forms of cultural capital exist within communities. These include *aspirational*—the aspirations students hold despite structural inequities; *familial*—family contexts that enrich students’

lives; *linguistic*—the communication or language skills students hold; *navigational*—students’ abilities to navigate educational spaces; *resistance*—the application of historical legacies to improve outcomes for others; and *social capital*—the utilization of social connections to gain access to and navigate social institutions.

### FINDINGS

Yosso’s CCW featured prominently in participants’ persistence narratives and led to the expansion of the original CCW framework toward a model of Maternal Cultural Wealth (MCW). Mothers emerged as strong conduits of capital, motivating their sons to matriculate and persist through challenges. The additional forms of capital comprising MCW are direct derivatives of Yosso’s *familial* and *aspirational* notions of capital. They include *provident capital*, *filiat piety*, *custodial capital*, and *emotional capital*.

The power of provident capital to promote persistence is an important counternarrative that might inform previous findings which have suggested Latinos’ desire to be providers is a risk factor for college completion. As overwhelmingly first-generation students, participants were motivated toward college completion to ultimately become dependable and capable providers for their families. Filial piety closely overlaps with provident capital but provides further nuance to connote the strong sense of duty students felt to care for their families upon college completion. Participants were motivated by a strong desire to give back to their parents for their sacrifice, dedication, love, and opportunities. When asked whether failure in college was possible, participants dismissed the notion as disrespectful toward their mothers who sacrificed so much for them. Custodial capital refers to the discerning and protective approach mothers maintained while raising Latinos to be academically successful that transferred to their sons. Beyond basic safety precautions, custodial

<sup>1</sup>The absence of a unifying term that enjoys consensus led the author to employ the term Latinx in an effort to be inclusive of gender nonconforming members. Latino is used in reference to individuals who identify as men within a gender binary.

capital connotes discerning choice making as peer, familial, and community networks are shaped. Emotional capital connotes the strong emotive connection sons experienced with their mothers. Emotional capital is closely related to custodial capital because close connections enabled mothers to establish themselves as credible custodians of care for their sons, even beyond the limits of physical custody in college. Upon matriculation, participants reported engaging in meaningful emotive conversations that released stress during trying times. These connections helped them feel validated, loved, and supported by someone with whom they were closely connected.

## CONCLUSION

The data from this study demonstrate that Latinos hold tremendous academic promise

and underscore the significance of maternal influence in the educational trajectories of Latinos. Their persistence was motivated by a desire to honor mothers for the love, sacrifice, diligence, and the commitment they consistently showed. Discussion regarding Latinx educational experiences have long emphasized gaps—in recruitment, matriculation, retention, and persistence—and progress has not matched demographic realities that portend staggering growth. These foreboding factors cultivate deficit perspectives and an incomplete reality. More must be done to highlight the strengths-based counternarratives of persistence and success and to offer guidance for better policies and practice. More emphasis must be given to the profound cultural wealth that compels this comunidad to thrive academically despite dire statistical

realities. A more comprehensive view suggests Latinos desire to access higher education, to excel, and to uplift their communities. They do this for their families and—sometimes exclusively—for the overwhelming love of their mothers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Tracy Arámbula Ballysingh** is an assistant professor of Higher Education Student Affairs at the University of Vermont. A qualitative P-16 educational access and equity scholar, her work explores the systems, policies, and contexts that preclude or promote achievement for first-generation, low-income students of color. A former elementary educator, academic advisor, university administrator, and legislative staffer, Dr. Ballysingh's work is informed by her experience in education policy and practice.

## REFERENCES

- Ashkenas, J., Park, H., & Pearce, A. (2017, August 24). Even with affirmative action, Blacks and Hispanics are more underrepresented at top colleges than 35 years ago. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/24/us/affirmative-action.html>
- Bowen, W. G., Kurzweil, M. A., & Tobin, E. M. (2005). *Equity and excellence in American higher education*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Cabrera, N. L., & Hurtado, S. (2015). The ivory tower is still White: Chicano/Latino college students on race, ethnic organizations, and campus racial segregation. In R. E. Zambana & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *The magic key: The educational journey of Mexican Americans from K-12 to college and beyond* (pp. 145-167). Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Credé, M., & Niehorster, S. (2012). Adjustment to college as measured by the student adaptation to college questionnaire: A quantitative review of its structure and relationships with correlates and consequences. *Educational Psychology Review*, 24, 133-165.
- Harris, A. (2018, April 18). When disadvantaged students overlook elite colleges. Many poor, minority high-schoolers don't apply to top institutions even though they could get in—A decision that can have lasting consequences. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/04/when-disadvantaged-students-overlook-elitecolleges/558371/>
- Hill, N. E., & Torres, K. (2010). Negotiating the American dream: The paradox of aspirations and achievement among Latino students and engagement between their families and schools. *Journal of Social Issues*, 66, 95-112.
- Kang, C., & Torres, D. G. (2018, April). Study snapshot: College undermatching, degree attainment, and minority students. Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, New York City, NY.
- Kiyama, J. M. (2010). College aspirations and limitations: The role of educational ideologies and funds of knowledge in Mexican American families. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47, 330-356.
- Kiyama, J. M., Museus, S. D., & Vega, B. E. (2015). Cultivating campus environments to maximize success among Latino and Latina college students. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2015(172), 29-38. doi:10.1002/he.20150
- Matos, J. M. D. (2015). La familia: The important ingredient for Latina/o college student engagement and persistence. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 48, 436-453.
- Museus, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2017). The impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *Review of Higher Education*, 40, 187-215.
- Núñez, A. M., Hoover, R. E., Pickett, K., Stuart-Carruthers, C., & Vásquez, M. (2013). *Latinos in higher education and Hispanic-serving institutions: Creating conditions for success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rios-Aguilar, C., & Kiyama, J. M. (2012). Funds of knowledge: An approach to studying Latina(o) students' transition to college. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 11, 2-16. doi:10.1080/15348431.2012.631430
- Rodriguez, S. L., Lu, C., & Bukoski, B. E. (2016). "I just feel like I have to duke it out by myself": How Latino men cope with academic and personal obstacles during college. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, 2(2), 64-101. doi:10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2016.2.2.63-101
- Sáenz, V. B., de las Mercédez, C., Rodriguez, S. G., & Garcia-Louis, C. (2017). Latino men and their fathers: Exploring how Community Cultural Wealth influences their community college success. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 11, 89-110. doi:10.24974/amae.11.2.351
- Sáenz, V. B., García-Louis, C., Drake, A. P., & Guida, T. (2018). Leveraging their family capital: How Latino males successfully navigate the community college. *Community College Review*, 46, 40-61.
- Santiago, D. A., Galdeano, E. C., & Taylor, M. (2015). *The condition of Latinos in education: 2015 factbook*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571548.pdf>
- Witkow, M. R., Huynh, V., & Fuligni, A. J. (2015). Understanding differences in college persistence: A longitudinal examination of financial circumstances, family obligations, and discrimination in an ethnically diverse sample. *Applied Developmental Science*, 19, 4-18. doi:10.1080/10888691.2014.946030
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.