

# Unveiling the Promise of Community Cultural Wealth to Sustaining Latina/o Students' College-Going Information Networks

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This article examines the norms of school failure and illuminates ways in which low-income students of color respond to their needs for educational advancement when conditions to support their college-going identities are severely limited in the school context. Our primary finding confirms the value of a grassroots approach to improving schools through learning from key resources in students' communities on how to best assist them to meet their college-going aspirations. From a larger study, we extrapolate data from two racially segregated urban schools and confirm that when school size, student demographics, student achievement, and students' social economic status are similar, students are able to overcome the limits of their schools and acquire the information necessary to better prepare them for college. This finding is significant when issues related to transforming the structure and culture of schooling are considered, particularly in changing

how schools conduct their operations to making college a possible destination, particularly for populations that are historically excluded from postsecondary education.

At the core of our analysis is the investigation into ways that college-related information is shared between educators and students. This area of inquiry is becoming more significant as school districts move toward an all college-preparatory curriculum by the time students reach high school. Conversely, college and universities continue to face obstacles of making higher education accessible for low-income students of color and have intensified outreach efforts intended to compete for the best and most diverse student bodies. Given these challenges, we examine our data to see whether schools have made college-going opportunities an essential component in students' educational experiences and the ways in which students draw upon this information to further their college-going identities. Although one's identity is fluid and transformative over time, by college-going identity we refer to students being *college-ready*, which refers to a student's acquisitions of expectations for academic success and actively engaging in the level of academic skills that would make them eligible and ready for college. This definition is influenced by Conley (2007), who emphasized the necessity for students who are college-ready to meet the academic preparations necessary so individuals can enroll and succeed in college without remediation. The literature suggests the importance of developing students' college-going identity as a part of the solution to increase their academic resiliency. By applying these ideals to school improvement efforts, we view students' access to essential college-related information as a significant component of secondary education, because college attainment is one pathway in which low-income students of color can access life opportunities that are otherwise few and far between.

Our interest in more closely examining urban students' experiences with accessing high-stakes, college-going information has led us to conduct research in two large comprehensive high schools that are racially and ethnically isolated. Hence, we are interested in examining the learning experiences among low-income Chicana/os and Puerto Ricans for two reasons. First, these two groups have a rich history of political activism that has provided meaning to a culmination of race, class, and gender identities as Chicana/os and Puerto Ricans (Delgado Bernal 2002, Muñoz 1989). Additionally, these two groups are constantly under attack in debates about assimilation and their perceived lack of ability to acquire White middle-class culture, which is often viewed as tantamount to academic success (Badillo 2006, Rodríguez 1975). Third, these groups have low high school completion rates and are underrepresented in institutions of higher education (De Jesús and Vásquez 2005; Solórzano, Ledesma, Pérez, Burciaga, and Ornelas 2003). Finally, these two populations are commonly impacted by poverty and overall quality of life in their respective geographic regions, and are disproportionately affected by low high school graduation rates and college attainment. As one of the

fastest growing populations in the public school system, Valencia (2002) observed, “Latina/o segregation has intensified to such an extent that they are now the most segregated racial/ethnic minority group in the United States” (105).

### RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Our data has led us to consider the role of the Community Cultural Wealth model as an alternative framework to engage local school stakeholders in the efforts of school improvement (Yosso 2005). We see this strategy as a change of reference in how the needs of communities and schools are assessed by building upon the conditions in which communities of color assist students in developing a sense of resiliency for academic success. By doing so, we argue that school reform needs to integrate what is being referred to as students’ *funds of knowledge* into the cultural processes of schooling. Moll and his colleagues (2001) discussed the benefits of classroom practice by centering teachers’ pedagogical emphasis on the local, community-based knowledge of working-class Mexican students. Their approach has broken grounds as to how we as researchers look at the use of local knowledge in establishing social networks and interactions in the classroom setting. To apply their idea to a theory for school improvement, our study intends to describe the various ways community resources can be utilized to help students connect with the adults who believe in their chances for academic success. Because the reform literature has become overdependent on a structural analysis that has inadvertently brought a deficit lens to schools, communities, and its students, we see benefits in expanding upon the educational practices that have been effective within communities of color. This inductive grass-roots approach to improving schools by making broader use of effective community-based practices opens a significant pathway to bolstering a school culture that draws upon the strengths of its local community to increase its effectiveness.

The concept of teacher–student information networks is one dimension of school culture that is often overlooked by interested school reformers. The literature suggests that school culture has many definitions, but these ideas are consistent in referring to the constitution of common norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that help construct the daily practices and relationships that underlie school missions (Conchas and Rodríguez 2008; Noguera 2002; Peterson 2002; Sarason 1979). Research also suggests that students who have caring, supportive adults involved in their lives perform better academically (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Rolón-Dow 2005). This finding also holds true for students who are attending high school (Bogenschneider 1997; Luthar and Becker 2002; Werner 1990). A good relationship with a caring, supportive adult can offset the effects of bad relationships (Rutter 1985). When adults are not involved in the schooling process of young

people, research suggests that students are more likely to have poor homework habits, lower grades, and a greater propensity to dropping out of school (Becker and Epstein 1982; Rumberger et al. 1990; Stevenson and Baker 1987). Sarason (1979, 1981) suggested that school reform efforts are destined to fail if culture is deemphasized in favor of solely reforming structure and curriculum. Information networks, therefore, are one aspect of school culture that shapes adult–student relationships, and the quality within these networks is evident in ways adults in the school carry out their perceptions and expectations of the students they serve.

Informing this study's analysis is Cooper and Liou's (2007) research regarding the various types of school-related information a student may receive as an indicator of school expectations for students. These researchers discovered that guidance counselors' racial stereotypes toward students can influence their service delivery in developing students' academic plans as early as their ninth-grade career. Their data is situated in the context of a districtwide curricular reform to increase students' access to college preparatory classes. Ironically, their research shows that guidance counselors' perceptions about students' chances of going to college is one major obstacle to the implementation of such reform. The processes in which counselors' expectations for students' college-going success is differentiated led Cooper and Liou to argue for schools to pay close attention to the social networks between educators and students and identify the types of *high stakes information* that are crucial to their preparation for college.

By high-stakes information networks, Cooper and Liou (2007) referred to the knowledge from which students draw upon to understand the circumstances of their schooling conditions and the necessary navigational strategies to gain the essential resources and opportunities that further their academic and college-going identities. We refer to this concept to suggest that students' information networks shape their pathways toward success in high school and college access (Stanton-Salazar 2001). In addition, the qualities by which students are supported through their information networks are important to their understanding about how to access and make use of the opportunity structure within their school.

To further assist our ability to analyze beneath the structural norms of schooling, we assert that the role of Critical Race Theory (CRT) can add to our understanding about the power relationships that play out in its daily operations. CRT (Chapman 2007; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006; Solórzano and Ornelas 2002) provides us with a framework to understand the relationship between the intersections of race, social class, and gender in the school achievement debate. One important principle of CRT is to center people's experiential knowledge as a way to counter belief systems that consider the underachievement of low-income students of color as predetermined and ordinary (Solórzano and Ornelas 2002). We argue that the ways in which educators think about students' race and academic achievement plays a central role in the structure and cultural processes of schooling, and thus improving schools requires changing deficit perceptions and

attitudes among school practitioners. Additionally, CRT provides the conceptual frame that Yosso (2005) referred to as *community cultural wealth* as a method for us to gain a deeper understanding about how low income students of color enact their information seeking behaviors by developing alternative social networks that enable their academic success. Although race is a socially constituted category and is fluid and changeable over time (Omi and Winant 1994), our study is situated in contexts where race and class are enduring features in the material realities that people live in; and, in the manner to which educational opportunities are structured.

By drawing from Yosso's (2005) *community cultural wealth* model, we employed in-depth interviews with Latina/o students, as well as participant observations at two urban, racially segregated high schools to better determine the extent to which these schools utilized their students' community-based cultural resources for the formation and keeping of college-going aspirations. Yosso suggested that many scholars' conceptualizations of social and cultural capital theories are interpreted in ways that often work to privilege White, class-conscious ways of acquiring information and ways of knowing. These conceptualizations often presuppose that it is incumbent for low-income communities of color to aspire to and obtain middle-class norms and values in place of the belief systems they may already possess prior to coming to school (Khalenberg 2001). In response, Yosso asserted that communities of color possess community cultural wealth, which is comprised of six forms of capital that are historically undervalued and unacknowledged in White, middle-class institutions like schools.

For instance, *aspirational capital* describes a people's ability to have high hopes for the future in spite of social, economic, and institutional barriers one may consistently face. *Linguistic capital* makes reference to the various ways in which people are able to communicate in more than one language and other forms of expressions such as art, music, and poetry. *Social capital*, understood to consist of networks of people and community resources, refers to one's ability to draw instrumental and social support through sources such as community based organizations, churches, and community-based cultural and athletic events. *Navigational capital* is measured by one's ability to make sense of and navigate social institutions where people of color are underrepresented. *Familial capital* makes reference to cultural practices and forms of knowledge that rely on extended familial relationships. Furthermore, these relationships enable the construction and maintenance of collective understandings around emotional, educational, and occupational consciousness. Ultimately, this consciousness is fomented within families and other social activities like sports teams, schools, religious, and other culturally relevant activities. Finally, *resistance capital* refers to those skills that are garnered through oppositional identities/behavior that challenge instances of inequality.

## METHODS

The importance of students' access, and/or lack thereof, to high stakes information networks has led us to examine the extent to which institutional agents and families play a role in encouraging the academic success of low income Latina/o students in racially segregated comprehensive high schools. Thus, this mixed methods study was guided by the following four research questions through using our two partnering schools as our units for analysis:

1. Where do students go to seek the high stakes information they need to be academically successful?
2. How do institutional agents (e.g., guidance counselors, teachers, community members, and administrative staff) structure opportunities to access high stakes information based upon their academic expectations for students across race and gender?
3. As a result, how do students across race and gender acquire the kinds of resources that will enable their access to high stakes information?
4. What can schools do to becoming effective in assisting students to develop further their college-going identities?

Our data collection methods included in-depth focus group and individual interviews with students, teachers, and guidance counselors, multiple rounds of student surveys, and observations. We purposefully sampled two large comprehensive high schools, in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, in our attempt to better understand the ways that high-stake information is structured. Our student participants were ninth and eleventh graders, as we wanted to compare and contrast these students' initial development of a college-going identity upon entering high school with students who were on the cusp of finishing high school. Additionally, we collected curricular documents, which helped us determine the kinds of courses that were available for students at each school site. The quantitative data presented in this article were gathered through student surveys, which consisted of an 85-item self-reporting instrument to inform us of various ways information is distributed: family; peer networks; and school policies and procedures.

A three-phase data analysis procedure was used to make sense of our collected data. We first extrapolated recurring themes that emerged from the data. In particular, students', teachers', and counselors' questionnaire data were examined to determine student perceptions of their teachers and counselors and their role in the schooling process. This analysis was descriptive and looked at the relationship between variables and constructs that captured high-stakes information at the school and to whom and when it was disseminated. The second phase of the data analysis involved the coding of the interviews. This data was coded based on whether the information was high stakes and where students had access to this

type of information. Once the data was coded based on this scheme, a matrix was developed to illuminate whether the information provided was high-stakes information. The third phase of the data analysis involved analyzing the student focus group and follow-up interviews to triangulate the patterns that emerged from the in-depth interviews. This analytical approach allowed us to draw conclusions that were fed back to the data in a way to validate the patterns that emerged. The qualitative approach to this phase of data collection was critical to our understanding of students' experiences, as their voices were helpful in providing interpretations of what we saw and documented. Ethnographic methods were also used to observe adult-student networks both inside and outside of the classroom.

Finally, we strategically selected two urban high schools that are predominantly Latina/o-serving and are disproportionately impacted by high drop-out rates, overcrowded, have high student to teacher ratios, and are located in communities that have a low percentage of adults over 25 years of age who have never experienced college. We view these as potential factors to the developments of students' college-going identity and high stakes information networks. We took account of these school conditions as a common denominator in our approach to examining how and where students seek out the information networks that would promote their academic success.

## FINDINGS

Our sample at Valley High School was comprised of 61% young women. Sixty-five percent of the students reported being Spanish-dominant bilinguals. Less than 8% of our participants were born outside of the United States, and 96% of them came from families where parents' highest level of education was high school graduation. Despite students' admission of a low college matriculation rate in their own community, our study at Valley High School shows that students, overall, believe they can succeed academically when entering ninth grade. Their sense of belief in their ability allows us to measure their interest in education in relation to their expectations for success. The ninth graders believed their parents have high expectations for them and also believed that high school graduation and college attainment was a realistic goal. This finding is consistent with our parent survey ( $n = 125$ ) and national survey that indicate an overall increase in students' expectations for academic success. Measurement of students' aspirational capital tells us that 98% of the students indicate that they want to go to college and 82% of the students reported that their parents expected them to complete at least a four-year bachelor's degree.

Our findings suggest that students in the ninth grade felt the need to be connected with their school. They also suggested to us that their school was large, impersonal, and understaffed, but at the same time they were compelled to feel belonged and

cared for by their school. In our focus group, some Valley High students described their transition from a smaller feeder school as “kind of scary.” When compared to the high achieving eleventh graders at University High School, we found that students who are driven to succeed were less likely to identify their support system with schooling. In fact, they pointed to peers, local churches, and family members as their resources to access information that supported their academic aspirations.

Although evidence has pointed to students who arrive at Valley High School with aspirations to succeed, the school counselors’ expectations for them are dependent on students’ assigned academic program and possess a different view on what students need to have life success. Each counselor supports 425 students per year and remarked that ninth graders were the students with the greatest needs but that services to meet those needs were gravely overlooked at the school. The counselors consistently agreed that the central problem to the school’s high drop-out rate was their undercommitment to the ninth graders because student discipline, substitute teaching, paperwork, and ensuring twelfth graders’ graduation had taken precedence in their schedule. In addition, our counselors’ data from Valley High School suggested inconsistent views among school adults as to their role when it came to encouraging students to seek college opportunities. Therefore, opportunities to access information about college were determined upon students’ classroom and program assignments as well as counselors’ perceptions of their potential to succeed. For example, the career counselor disagreed with the notion that every child should be going to college.

I don’t believe that every kid should go to college. These kids are from families where they have little to live on and the best thing for many of them is to get a job. . . . Look, I need my car mechanic and if everyone goes to college, then where am I going to get my mechanic? And so what if that person did not go to college but can do a damn good job on my car? The one I have right now, Miguel, is doing a wonderful job and our society needs those people too. If a kid comes to me wanting a job, I will not hesitate to refer them to jobs or technical schools.

Another counselor, who directs the College Preparatory Program geared towards English Language Learners observed:

When we think that every kid must go to college, I can’t imagine what society would do if every kid were to achieve their dream. Now congratulations, every kid went to college and there is nobody to fix the cars, nobody to fix the TVs and VCRs, and there are a lot of things that are not going to get taken care of. It’s a disservice to the kids to think that every kid should or could go to college whether their ability or interest you know indicate otherwise.

Although the counselors’ aspirations for the child vary at Valley, they are reported to believe that every child is receiving an equal education at the school.



Our data from counselors at Valley High School have shown us the disparities in expectations and the extent to which care is transmitted within adult–student relationships. The given shortfall in the school structure, combined with disparities in adult–student expectations begged us to question, “Where are students forging their information networks if they are unable to foster those relationships with school adults?” Recent research (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Valenzuela 1999) highlights the importance of establishing high-quality, interpersonal student–teacher relationships as a way to enable urban youth to achieve academic success. In turn, these relationships are predicated on teachers who are not only passionate about their content areas, but who are also passionate about their students and continuously strive to know their students, their families, and their communities well. Likewise, although we feel these types of relationships are of the utmost importance in schools, our students noted that most of their teachers and counselors were not seriously committed to establishing them.

### High Stakes Information Networks as a Source of Community Cultural Wealth

As a result of experiencing the ways in which urban schools have failed to provide students’ access to information relative to their college-going aspirations, students at University High School were able to utilize their social capital to connect with local community agencies to support their academic aspirations. Despite the feeling of disconnectedness with their school, students at University High School voiced a connection between their high academic achievement and access to sources of social capital through their ties to a religious organization and/or other extracurricular activities. When asked which faith or local church they professed or belonged to, students from University High School stated that they were either Catholic or Pentecostal. They mentioned that the main benefit of participating in these activities consisted of targeted recreational activities for youth, which steered them away from antischool, oppositional youth culture like gang membership and truancy. These high degrees of social capital also facilitated their access to school-related resources like homework help and mentorship. Pedro commented:

Growing up, my mom always took me and my sister to church and she always had us involved in youth groups as far as, you know, Sunday school; and we went on trips with our church groups and that always helped me keep on a straight path.

In addition to his church involvement, Pedro’s participation on athletic teams also played a major role in his high school career, because it helped him gain much access to positive help-seeking resources like information regarding college, mentorship from his teammates’ parents, and access to computers at his friends’

homes. This intergenerational closure (Carbonaro 1998), marked by social and informational networks comprised of Pedro's friends and their parents, proved to be valuable for Pedro, because he now is very confident that he has the information that he needs to become successful in college, get a job after graduation, and obtain a middle-class lifestyle. He commented:

A lot of my friends who I play with on the teams are a lot better off than me. Like, David's parents live out in the suburbs and both his parents are college psychology professors and make a lot of money. They both have been a great influence on me because they've talked to me about what I need to get into college and be successful in college. They helped me make the decision on which university to apply to. I like their advice because I see that they have become successful. I want to follow their examples and also have a big house and nice cars like them one day.

Despite not having access to college information at their school, students at Valley High School are able to turn to Project GRAD Los Angeles (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), which is a community-based organization located within the high school that aims to get students to think and apply to colleges and universities. Project GRAD is currently committed to serving 20,000 youth in the region, and is staffed by bilingual and highly educated Latina/os who want to see higher college-going rates among Latina/o youth. Although their services are indispensable at Valley High School, students often learn about Project GRAD from their school counselors, who have become overdependent on their services to provide college information.

### Linguistic Capital

As evidenced in recent studies (Flores-González 1999, 2002; Hébert and Reis 1999; Yosso 2005), several of our participants suggested that multicultural peer networks consisting of other high achieving urban youth had the potential to contain high degrees of linguistic capital, which influenced their high academic achievement. In fact, although the majority of the students we spoke with were English-dominant bilinguals, they spoke about their multicultural approach to their school peer networks, as they expressed the importance of their friendships with Latinas/os and other friends of color, like African Americans and Mexican Americans. This finding suggests that many high-achieving students often seek friends who possess diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, because they positively support their academic achievement. Cecilia remarked that the multicultural and multilingual peer networks she belonged to were acquired as a result of her church membership and, thus, were highly conducive to supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and her overall academic performance.

Ever since I was in the ninth grade, I have been going to church regularly. I also sing in the church choir. The people at church have always been friendly and supportive of me. I feel like I really belong. I have also met a lot of people at church. I have a lot of friends from different backgrounds. I have Hispanic, White, Asian, and Black friends. We all treat each other as friends and we keep each other in line. I really think going to church has helped me become a better student.

Estrella also talked about her involvement in a church and connected it with her high academic achievement. Like Cecilia, she was able to participate in church activities with peer networks consisting of other Latina/o youth. She also felt that these friendships and her participation in religious-based activities had a positive impact on her academic achievement. She remarked:

I'm involved in church very much. I have lots of friends of church in church. We do lots of things together. We do retreats and we invite other youths to come. We also evangelize together. We want other youths to know God and Jesus. There are also lots of camps in the summer and conventions in the Midwest. There are lots of Latinos that get together for these conventions and we have lots of fun. I really think that these church things have helped me be a good student.

Cecilia and Estrella spoke to the importance of connecting with youth from various linguistic backgrounds. Consequently, these youth were able to develop high quality relationships with each other and were able to utilize their languages to share with their peers the high-stakes information they received from knowledgeable adults in their churches. Therefore, it is important for educators to realize that their students' home languages can be powerful tools that can enable them to acquire and exchange information that they are not readily able to access at their schools. Hence, it is precisely through the use of their home languages outside of school that these youth of color are able to feel confident about their access to school resources and their ability to academically achieve that would otherwise not have been possible if they had solely relied on institutional agents, such as guidance counselors.

### Navigational Capital

Several of the students we interviewed suggested the extent to which their high degrees of navigational capital allowed them to access high stakes information. Furthermore, this navigational capital emanated from their connections to faith communities and sense of religiosity/spirituality. For example, although Pedro, Cecilia, and Estrella talked about the importance of receiving mentorship and informational resources through their social networks at church, several students specifically mentioned the influence of spirituality in their scholastic lives. This

particular finding is consistent with recent research (Cook 2000; Jeynes 2003), which shows that religious people are more likely to have a sense of resiliency, because they feel the spirit of God resides within them and steers them to positive things like high academic achievement. Rachel commented: "God has helped me become a good student. He has helped me keep focused. I know he helps me do the best I can in school." Likewise, Limari also commented: "God had helped me become a good student because He has been with me through all my struggles."

Although these participants credited their high academic achievement with their participation to church and school-related activities, other participants spoke about their involvement with community-based agencies. The youth we spoke with, such as Alexia, discovered these organizations through their intimate knowledge of their communities and/or through family members who knew these organizations well. Thus, this type of community work facilitated their engagement with school and with meeting people from different walks of life. Alexia stated:

I do all kinds of work with people in the community. I work with the Private Industry Council and help people get jobs. I also work with the Historical Society. These jobs keep me busy and focused on school and help me meet lots of interesting people.

Just like the recent research that shows that religiosity (Jeynes 2003; Muller and Ellison 2001; Park and Smith 2000; Sikkink and Hernández 2003) and participation in extracurricular activities (Flores-González 1999, 2002; Hébert and Reis 1999) have a positive impact on academic achievement for students of color, our participants also suggested that involvement in church and other school and community-based extracurricular activities served an important dual function. First, church involvement served as a protective measure by discouraging them from participating in oppositional youth culture (i.e., gang life and truancy), because it impinges on their scholastic endeavors. Second, involvement in these kinds of activities also contributed to their high degrees of social and navigational capital through the intergenerational closure between these students, their friends, and their friends' parents (Carbonaro 1999).

This high degree of intergenerational closure was valuable, because it insured that, in spite of the inequitable distribution of high-stakes information in their schools, these students were able to navigate themselves through these complex school terrains. Furthermore, they were able to gain access to important resources like good advice through adult mentorship and other positive help-seeking behaviors that encouraged them to pursue academic excellence and a school kid identity (Flores-González 2002). Consequently, it is important for educators to note that communities of color employ their navigational capital to counteract institutions that inequitably structure their access to high stakes information. In turn, this high stakes information is garnered outside of school, as youth of color

use their community resources and knowledge to navigate places that often work to deny them important information related to the school going process.

### Resistance Capital

All the high achieving students with whom we spoke were very clear about their Puerto Rican identity, always stating to their friends that they were Boricua or *puertorriqueño*, and proud of it. This particular finding challenges the belief held by other researchers (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 2003) that, for many students of color, being a good student is essentially tantamount to *acting White*. Contrary to these beliefs, Flores-González (1999) documented that the high achieving students she interviewed did not hide their Puerto Rican ethnicity. In fact, Hine (1992) found that the negative stereotypes held by teachers and peers served as a motivating tool for the Puerto Rican high achievers in her school to do well in school. Additionally, we also believe that this phenomenon reflects the successful utilization of our participants' ethnic identities, because they were able to easily make the transition between their home and school worlds.

This finding compels us to believe that our participants' sense of school-based marginalization, rather than cause them to resist the idea of schooling, actually worked to motivate them to academically perform well. Thus, we have decided to name this finding the *marginalization as motivation concept*. This concept also works to support previous research (Flores-González 1999, 2002; Noguera 2003) that challenges the commonly held belief that involuntary migrant group status, often associated with the sociopolitical reality of Puerto Ricans, is a strong and predictable indicator of low academic achievement (Ogbu 2003).

Additionally, a majority of our respondents frequently expressed their frustration about how Puerto Ricans were often negatively represented in the city. In turn, they thought that their high academic achievement could have the potential of dispelling these negative stereotypical images. Jordan stated:

I'm proud to be Puerto Rican and bilingual. But, you know, White people stereotype Puerto Ricans and think that we're not serious about our education. I want to prove them wrong.

Jasmine also commented on the negative stereotypes that White students in her advanced placement classes held towards her by virtue of being the only minority student in the class. In turn, she also felt compelled to use her high academic performance as a way to prove others wrong about the academic potential of Puerto Ricans.

Sometimes in my AP [advanced placement] classes, like AP English and AP History, some of the White students make you feel really small because you're the only Latino student in the class. I remember one time when a boy asked me what I was doing in the class. He said that he didn't think that people like us could be in these kinds of classes. I told him that he shouldn't be so stereotypical and that we can be smart, too.

These students expressed pride in their Puerto Rican ethnicity. It became evident that many of the students used their education as a tool with which to prove to their peers they had the potential to be good students. Our observations also clearly revealed that our participants were subjected to a highly subtractive curriculum (Valenzuela 1999), because very little effort was made to weave these students' linguistic, historical, and sociocultural realities into the curriculum. These subtractive curricular practices, according to our informal conversations with student participants, were evidenced in various ways like discouraging the speaking of Spanish in the classroom to not including the histories and significance of Latino communities in the United States.

### Familial Capital

Although nine of the ten students we spoke with at University High mentioned they came from traditional two-parent households, five of them talked about the three distinct roles their mothers played in their school and home lives. First, these mothers often took it upon themselves to help their daughter or son with schoolwork. When the mother felt she could not directly help with schoolwork, she actively sought out the necessary resources that would facilitate her child's learning process. Second, several of the students felt compelled to make their mothers proud of them by getting good grades. Third, several of the students commented that their mothers served as their friends or mentors in times of need or personal crisis. When asked to elaborate on her mother's role in her education, Lisa stated:

Ever since I was in middle school, my mom has been sending me to pre-college programs and doing things like getting me stuff on the ACT and the kinds of questions they ask on that test. I also go to my mom for personal problems that come up. My mom is always coming down hard on me to do well in school. So if she can't help me with my school stuff she finds somebody who can.

Lisa's mother, like other mothers of students in this study, went the extra mile to counsel her daughter and seek informational resources that would aid in the college application and general learning processes. This finding supports the work of several scholars and their discussions pertaining to the influence of

Latina/Puerto Rican mothers in the academic lives of their children (Hidalgo 2000; Hine 1992; Gándara 1995; Reis and Díaz 1999; Rolón 2000; Yosso 2005), because our participants' mothers also held their children to high academic expectations and actively sought out human resources that could help their children (e.g., with homework) in the event that they were not able to.

Other students spoke about the power of their mother's influence and expressed the desire to do well in school to make their mothers proud of them. Pedro commented:

My mom has been my inspiration to do well in school. I remember that I used to make bad grades in school and my mother would become sad. When I started to bring report cards home with As for the first time, I remember the happy look in my mother's eyes. When I saw that look in her eyes, I just felt that it was much more rewarding to get good grades. I also remember going to family picnics and my mother would be talking about my grades. The rest of the family would then start talking about me. They were all proud of me.

Pedro was driven to do well in school to make his mother happy. It was also important for him to be the pride of his family. He also mentioned that his school did not do much to help him select a college or to fill out financial aid or admissions forms. Although his mother was not a high school graduate, and therefore had never been to college, she took up the role of helping him acquire and fill out the necessary forms he would need to go to college.

Erica was unique from the other participants in that she contrasted the roles that both her parents played in her school success. Although she perceived that her father played a limited role as an authority figure that demanded she follow the "rules of the house," she commented on the words of encouragement and friendship that were characteristic of her mother's role as a nurturing supporter.

My mother is the best. She supports me in everything I do. She is always willing to support me at whatever I do at school. She is always very excited about helping me with my work and she always talks to me more like a friend than a mom. My father is very different. He always comes across as the authority figure.

Cecilia also relied exclusively on her mother for her trust and support in times of personal need and remarked that teachers and friends could not be trusted for revealing or seeking support in times of crises. It was evident, then, that she was involved in a high quality interpersonal relationship with her mother.

When I have a personal problem, I don't really trust my teachers or friends. I usually go to my mother, who is always willing to be there for me because I know she won't go around spilling my personal life to everyone.

Rachel spoke about her mother encouraging her to do her best in school so she would not be a high school dropout like her. Rachel's mother never had the experience of going to college; nonetheless, she knew the importance of after-school programs, tutoring services, and having access to college information, because these things would greatly facilitate her daughter's entry into college. Rachel commented:

My mom dropped out of high school in the tenth grade. So she doesn't want me to have the hard life that she has had. For her, it's a top priority that I stay in school and go to college. She has gotten me in after-school programs and found me jobs. She makes a lot of phone calls to people and asks about the kinds of programs that exist to get me help with school work and information I need to get into college.

Based on these statements, it was clear that mothers felt much more obligated to take on substantial roles in the schooling lives of these high achievers and that fathers were not as willing to assume these types of roles. Thus, in these particular cases, the mothers of students in this study manifested traditional gender roles within the home. The students from Valley High School also indicated that parental expectations also have the potential to significantly influence the development of their aspirational capital. Students from our focus group described their parents' expectations as "high" with concrete goals that include "diploma," "finish high school," and "go to college." Our focus group interviews show that students at Valley High school would visit local universities at their parents' insistence. When asked whether students intended to apply to any of these schools, the students pointed to their older siblings as their biggest supporters in pointing them to the application process. One student described this form of familial support as "like encouraging me to keep on going, to never give up." Similar to students from University High School, the focus group participants pointed to their mothers as being the most encouraging member of their family. Students repeatedly described this form of encouragement as caring. "She (the mother) cares more about you," according to the students.

### The Impact of Caring School Adults

All the participants in our study talked about the potential impact that caring school adults could add to their high academic achievement. The recurring theme of caring was especially prevalent at University High School in students' descriptions of good teachers. Our participants, like the high school students in previous studies (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Antrop-González, Vélez, and Garret 2005; Nieto 1998; Valenzuela 1999), defined caring teachers as those individuals who were interested in getting to know them on a personalized basis, who could be



trusted enough to talk about their personal problems and seek advice, and who would hold them to high academic expectations. Our participants also mentioned that they felt it was important for students to be able to rely on teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators for obtaining information or assistance with important tasks like applying for college, tutoring, or successfully securing part-time employment. Erica illustrates this point when she defines a caring teacher in the following way: "A good teacher is someone who knows the students and cares about the stuff going on in your life. A good teacher also wants you to absorb information and understand it." Cecilia also defined a caring teacher as one who held their students to high academic expectations and being constantly encouraged producing high quality schoolwork. "A good teacher is someone who cares enough not to accept low quality work. I like being pushed and told that I can do better. Some of my better teachers are like this." Ironically, although these students had clear definitions of what it meant to be a caring teacher, only one Puerto Rican Spanish teacher and a Puerto Rican guidance counselor qualified as caring teachers and/or staff members. At Valley High School, students largely identified with their Project GRAD counselors who were Spanish-dominant bilinguals. Like those school adults who do not possess the cultural sensibility of their students, the students we interviewed did not perceive their teachers as caring. Consequently, our participants did not feel compelled to seek or maintain meaningful, interpersonal relationships, advice, or mentorship with many of their teachers.

## CONCLUSION

We find that high-stakes information networks are extremely important to cultivating a college-going school culture. These networks consist of knowing adults who are effective in mentoring students and provide them with academic expectations and psychological support in the forms of high stakes information. The consequences of these networks make a difference in one's preparations to becoming college ready and beyond. In the case of our study, this information consists of curricular requirements for college, financial aid, and the strategies necessary for students to translate their college-going expectations into academic success. Unfortunately, our findings allude to the fact that the comprehensive, large high school structure does not often allow for this kind of supportive inclusion to take place. Moreover, not all teachers and/or guidance counselors genuinely feel that all urban youth should have access to these networks. Therefore, it is extremely important for preservice and inservice teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, teacher educators, and policy makers to continually strive to make sure that their respective schools are doing all they can to include all urban youth in "the know" about college, and make opportunities available to foster higher levels of student academic achievement. In reflecting upon our work, we often come

across students who are struggling academically but have high career aspirations. Because their encounters with counselors are frequently due to disciplinary matters and scheduling issues, students often do not have access to the information networks to help them navigate the barriers faced in school. Furthermore, many of these students are also not aware that a college degree is necessary for them to reach the professions they aspire to attain. More research and programs are needed to address counselors' expectations for students' school success.

Furthermore, our study finds that students who attend underperforming schools that are often overcrowded, impersonal, and understaffed are more likely to develop and identify their academic success with out-of-school, community, and family-based information networks. For those individuals who espouse deficit model frameworks upon low-income communities of color, these types of information networks are often seen as unlikely places where students can draw upon to inform their sense of resiliency. Our evidence points to these communities as culturally rich and are able to directly respond to their needs in light of larger structural inequities. The evidence herein also allows us to conclude that information networks are important resources of support for students—especially with those who have aspirations and goals that schools are unable to help them meet. Our findings do not suggest that schools should be alleviated from their responsibilities from creating the kind of school culture that could decisively respond to student needs. In fact, schools should take this report to address three fundamental aspects of schooling that reformers have not spent time looking into.

There are several ways in which we can employ community cultural wealth as a framework for school improvement. First, schools must critically examine some of the basic assumptions about the students they serve and have a clear understanding of their aspirations; hence, creating the kinds of information networks that provide high-stakes resources that can enable students to strive for success. Second, schools must perceive communities of color as culturally rich and find ways to build partnerships with local agencies where students spend time outside of school. The nature of these partnerships should take into account that students of color come to school with different forms of cultural wealth that enable them to respond to the sets of challenges they face and seek ways to navigate the complexities of school culture. Third, schools must deliberately monitor the quality of information networks that exist within and find ways to improve the quality of relationships between school adults and the students they serve.

Beyond tackling the normative dimensions of schooling, we must be more rigorous in recruiting and preparing teachers and counselors whose personal and professional socialization and attitudes reflect those of low-income students of color. We argue that training programs must intensify their efforts to recruit candidates who are knowledgeable about low-income communities of color and provide the pedagogical know-how in utilizing community cultural wealth as

a lens to serving students who come to school with the greatest needs. From a structural standpoint, we argue that the need is dire to develop a critical mass of teachers and counselors who are capable of teaching and relating to students in the most challenging environments. To lay the foundation for future research, we need to know whether these fundamental changes to the ways teaching and counseling candidates are recruited can strengthen training programs and assist educators of other backgrounds to develop antideficit and antiracist perspectives and pedagogies. Although we may be stating the obvious in terms of the need to diversify the teaching and counseling force, our findings also illuminate that the need to provide urban schools with educators whose life and communal experiences that mirror those of their students is greater than ever.

As a case in point, Christine Sleeter's (2001) study about preservice teachers finds that teachers often use a colorblind approach to cope with ignorance, fear, and lack of interest of talking about race. She finds that the colorblind approach by White preservice teachers has generated a force to silence preservice teachers of colors intent to address race and language as critical issues to their development. Our findings provide us the basis to believe that the colorblind approach is still a problematic frame of reference due to roots in the White and middle-class standards of interpretation about students' academic prospects. Sleeter's (2001) findings led her to draw connections with Zhixin Su's (1997) research that finds preservice teachers' perceptions of social change as not including changing structural inequity. Instead, Su's research participants regard such efforts as reverse discrimination. In our informal conversations with our colleagues, we note that these are disturbing trends that are happening in many teacher education programs. By bringing about concrete examples of practices of community cultural wealth, we hope that this article will help spark conversations about ways to raising schoolwide expectations from the ground up.

Adding Su's findings to our CRT analysis of an effective school culture, we argue for the importance of educators to continue to challenge dominant racial ideology about urban communities of color and the low expectations that schools often harbor about Latinas'/os chances of academic success. This study dispels the normative notions of Latina/o pathologies in school failure but also illuminates that students' communities are rich and dynamic in supporting students' college-going aspirations. Our data confirms that high-stakes information is one existing component of community cultural wealth that guides students to navigate between their school, communities, and personal aspirations for academic success. Given this important revelation, we confirm that *informational capital*, in the forms of high stakes information networks, is an essential factor to students' academic resiliency and a missing component of the existing community cultural wealth model. Our data shows that students' acquisition of information capital provides the constant encouragements that students need in the development of their college-going identities.

These important lessons are not meant to dismiss the many needs that low income communities of color have but to clarify that schools must work alongside with community members to cultivate the social networks that students need so they can reach a higher level of academic achievement. To take the first step towards change, we recommend for schools to integrate college and other relevant high stakes information into counseling sessions and classroom practices as strategies to making students' education relevant to their expectations to becoming college ready. This said, our acknowledgement on the role of urban schooling as an additive resource to mitigate the needs of the community only makes our change theory all the more important to consider. To transform policies and practices, schools must view parents, community advocates, religious leaders, and civic allies as a source of power and draw upon their sense of purpose in educating their children as a method to coconstruct a school culture of high expectations for academic achievement.

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