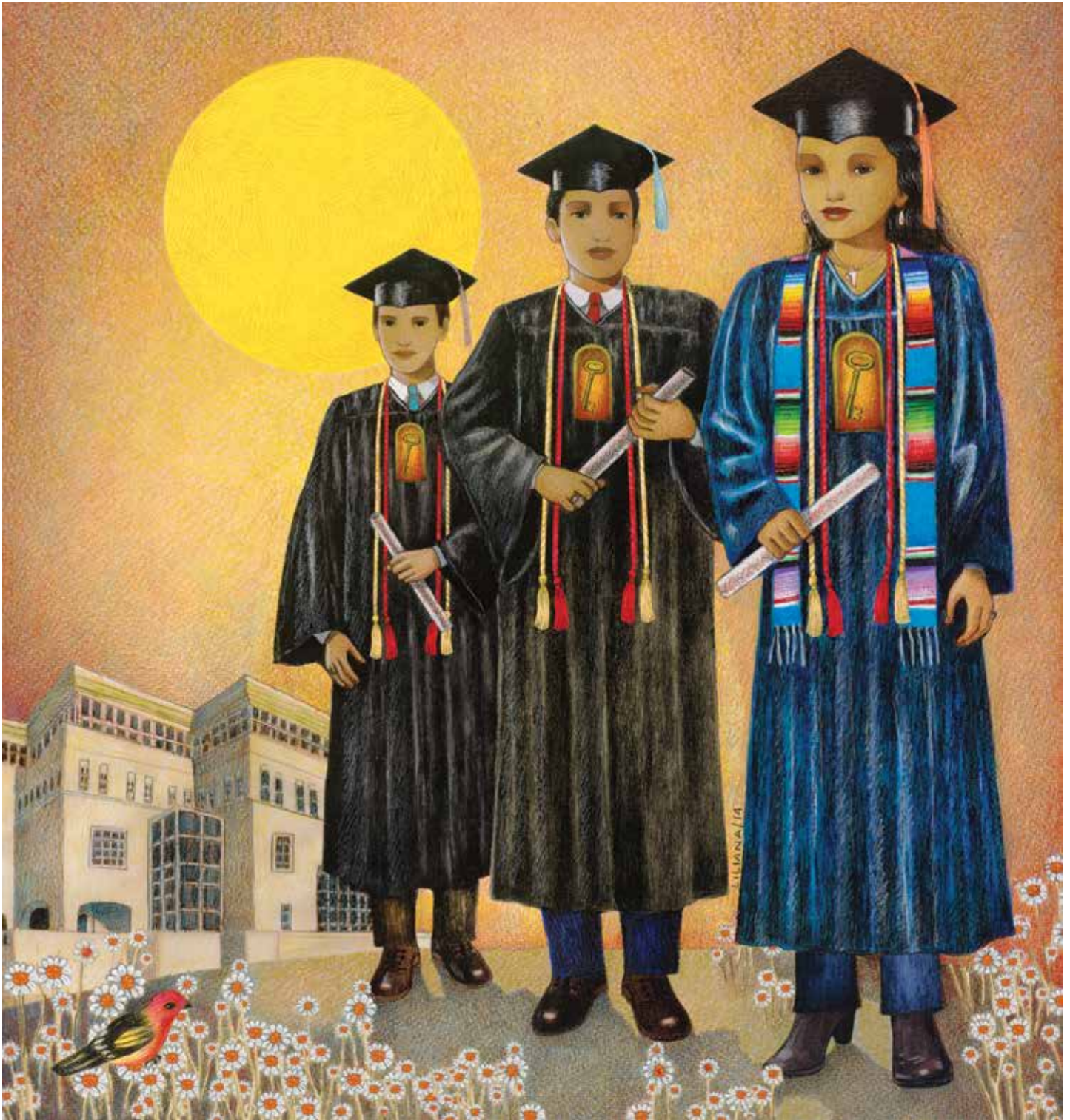


VENTAJAS/ASSETS Y CONOCIMIENTOS/KNOWLEDGE

Leveraging Latin@ Strengths to Foster Student Success





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Leveraging Latin@ Strengths to Foster Student Success

A Knowledge Essay from the UTSA Center for Research and Policy in Education



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ON THE COVER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Low-income, first-generation students are typically presumed to have a very limited ability to engage in a collegiate experience and successfully complete college. Educators who work with Latin@ and other underserved students under the premise of incompetence are often guided by an unchallenged discourse fueled with deficit language such as: “incapable of learning,” “not college material,” “speaking with accents,” “high risk,” “high maintenance,” “disadvantaged,” “remedial,” “underprepared,” or “culturally deprived.” Absent from this deficit-based imposing grand narrative are asset-based views that focus on Latin@ cultural wealth and experiential ways of knowing that students employ to transcend their socioeconomic circumstances and to excel in education. These assets are not always accumulated through formal education. Rather, students can develop strengths through lived experiences, cultural traditions and life challenges which help them become survivors and move past hurdles.

Purpose

Employing research findings from a TG Philanthropy funded study of Latin@ students at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), this essay:

- Describes the upside and downside of the Latin@ college experience;
- Outlines asset-based theoretical frameworks that may be employed to develop student success models;
- Identifies the *ventajas/assets* and *conocimientos/* knowledge that Latin@ students employ to succeed in college; and
- Provides examples of leveraging strategies that are aligned with Latin@ student assets and ways of knowing.

The Upside and Downside of the Latin@ College Experience

Students appreciated making new friends, learning new perspectives, gaining new experiences, and interacting with diverse students. Students also benefitted from dual enrollment programs, support programming such as supplemental instruction, faculty support and validation, active and applied learning strategies, advising and mentoring, peer support networks, financial aid, a welcoming campus climate, and interactions with diverse cultures. Further, attending college had transformed students in new and different ways. Among the things they said was that college had made them more mature,

confident, inquisitive and independent. Clearly, students were stronger as a result of having attended college.

Students faced significant challenges as they made the transition to college. The transition was not linear as students navigated multiple worlds—academic, family, peers, work, spiritual, *barrio*/community, and native country. Transitional challenges included: dealing with *choque*/cultural collision, experiencing liminality, experiencing separation anxiety, negotiating dislocation and relocation, and experiencing microaggressions. Students also struggled with issues of college affordability, college readiness, and inadequate advising.

Latin@ Student Assets

The study found that Latin@ possess a significant array of strengths and knowledge-bases (or repositories of knowledge) that are often not accounted for in the main-stream college student success discourse:

- 1) Aspirational
- 2) Linguistic
- 3) *Familial*
- 4) Social
- 5) Navigational
- 6) Resistant
- 7) '*Ganas*'/Perseverance
- 8) Ethnic Consciousness
- 9) Spirituality/Faith
- 10) Pluriversal

The Latin@ student profile that emerged from this study speaks to extraordinary strengths and drive to succeed, as well as the ability to become transformed from the college experience. Latin@ student assets should be

taken into consideration when developing student success frameworks. It cannot be denied that some students needed more academic skills (though many were clearly very smart). But what pushed these students was their firm commitments to their families and to the Latin@ community, the notion that they now served as role models for others in similar situations, their ability to use bilingualism to their benefit, their ability to resist microaggressions and to serve as personal support systems for their peers, and their remarkable capacity to maneuver themselves both in the foreign world of college and in their personal worlds.

The profile of these Latin@ students was also one of sheer determination and drive to succeed, of having a deep sense to “give back” to their communities, to have a purpose in life, and to function with an intellectual consciousness of pluriversality, a critical high-level cognitive skill which is advantageous when oppressed people have to negotiate shifting power structures and cultural conditions.

Reinforced with research evidence, as well as with hope and enthusiasm, it can definitely be asserted that Latin@ students possess an exceptional knowledge base which should be acknowledged and leveraged when developing student success frameworks. Armed with their own toolbox of *ventajas y conocimientos* and assisted with high-quality academics and student support services, Latin@ can definitely complete a college education.





INTRODUCTION

Like so many underserved students from low-income backgrounds, Latin@ students have generally been perceived as “problematic” and/or “dysfunctional” because many live in poverty, attend poorly-resourced schools and are the first in their families to attend college. These students are often described with a largely unchallenged narrative fueled with deficit language such as: “incapable of learning,” “not college material,” “speaking with accents,” “high risk,” “high maintenance,” “disadvantaged,” “remedial,” “underprepared,” or “culturally deprived” (Harper, 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González 2001; Linares-Rendón & Muñoz, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Educators who uncritically accept and internalize these spoken and unspoken assumptions are likely to believe that low-income students are not capable of knowing and that it is almost impossible to get these students to complete a college education. It can be very easy to give up on students when one believes there is no hope for them. Absent from this deficit-based grand narrative are asset-based views that focus on Latin@ student cultural wealth and experiential ways of knowing that these students employ to transcend their socioeconomic circumstances and to excel in education. These assets are accumulated not from formal education but through lived experiences and life challenges that have helped them become survivors and move past hurdles (Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

It cannot be denied that low-income students bring challenges to the educational system though often through no fault of their own. Documentation exists that low-income students are concentrated in poorly-resourced, largely-segregated schools of questionable quality

(Orfield, Kucsera & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012; Kucsera, J. & Flaxman, G. 2012). In contrast, those students who attend better-resourced schools not only possess more wealth (in the form of social and academic capital), but are also more likely to

graduate from college on time, earn more money, and enter high-level leadership positions in business and government (Chingos & McPherson, 2011; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2012). Yet there are multiple examples of low-income students who, despite seemingly insurmountable life challenges, are making good progress toward earning college degrees. Do low-income, first-generation Latin@ students possess a diverse array of cultural assets and ways of knowing that they employ to become successful college students? Can academic and student support staff leverage Latin@ student assets to foster greater academic success? This knowledge essay affirmatively answers these two questions.

Focus of Knowledge Essay

This knowledge essay is based on qualitative research findings from a TG Philanthropy funded study that involved 47 UTSA Latin@ students. For deeper probing, six students (an equal number of males and females) who participated in the focus groups were selected to participate in a 1-2 hour-long videotaped interview. All interviews were conducted at one Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI)—The University of Texas at San Antonio (see Tables 1&2). Analyzed transcripts uncovered the positive and negative aspects of the college experience, as well as instances where students directly or indirectly referred to an ability or strength they employed in their personal and academic contexts. Guided primarily by asset-based theoretical frameworks developed by Latin@ scholars (Anzaldúa, 1999; Delgado Bernal, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 2001; Yosso, 2005) allowed for critical inquiry and the development of common themes related to student strengths and knowledge. These themes were triangulated with the extant research on Latin@ student success.

This essay: 1) begins with a description of the contextual nature of a Latin@ college experience (describes the

upside and downside of that college experience) based on student voices from the study, 2) transitions to an outline of asset-based theoretical frameworks that may be employed to develop student success models, 3) identifies multiple strengths and knowledge students employed to their advantage and 4) describes Latin@ student *ventajas/assets* and *conocimientos/knowledge* that can be leveraged to foster success.

The Upside of the Latin@ College Experience

Attending college represented a time of great excitement for students. They appreciated making new friends, learning new perspectives, gaining new experiences, and interacting with diverse students. Students had also benefitted from participation in dual enrollment programs and support programming such as supplemental instruction. Further, they benefitted from faculty support and validation, active and applied learning strategies, advising and mentoring, peer support networks, financial aid, a welcoming campus climate, and interactions with diverse cultures. Further, being in a college environment had transformed students in new and different ways. When students were asked how attending college had changed them, among the things they said was that college had made them more mature, confident, inquisitive and independent. Clearly, students were stronger as a result of having attended college.

A Latina explained her transformational change:

Attending college has changed me completely. I mean, before I was in high school, I didn't even think about college. I had one way to view the world and that was basically: get a job, create a family, work with family, get your family bigger. And it's family, family, family, and there was only one kind of family. Coming to college is not only understanding how things work...but just opening myself to other cultures

TABLE 1. Eligibility Criteria for Participation

| Criteria for Inclusion |
|--|
| Latin@ Students |
| First Generation |
| Pell-Grant Eligible |
| Part-time or Full-time |
| Year in School: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th |
| Native and Transfer |

TABLE 2. Focus Group Participant Characteristics

| Status | Responses (Number and Percent) | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
| | Transfer | 16 (34%) | Native | 31 (66%) |
| Enrollment | Full-Time | 45 (95%) | Part-Time | 2 (5%) |
| First Generation¹ | Yes | 33 (70%) | No | 14 (30%) |
| Pell Grant Eligibility | Yes | 34 (72%) | No ² | 13 (28%) |
| Gender | Female | 29 (62%) | Male | 18 (38%) |

¹Self-Reported

²A student can still receive financial aid even though they are not Pell eligible.

and how we are really similar to other cultures even though we might look different. Especially when it comes to religion ...it just actually made me question more things than I used to before. I argue more. I think that's one of the major things that has changed about me. I think that's because I have grown more confident and...that I know things and I know how to analyze things. I know how to have an actual argument, not just fighting with people.

Another female student expressed how college had changed her:

College is changing me in a way where it's helping me become more of an adult, more independent, wiser in a way where I just have to say, this is it. I'm on my own. There is no more 'mommy I need this. Mommy cook me this.' It's pretty much being independent and being out in the real world.

A male student also reported significant change:

I'm a totally different person from what I was [like] four years ago because of [college]. In a way, I see myself more...mature. I actually do want to get that degree and see myself in the future with a degree. It's not – whatever. Oh, yeah, I'm going to college. I actually do want to do it. I see myself doing it.

A female student related the flexible way she was open to new perspectives:

I think as a person I've changed because I'm much more accepting. I've learned a lot of things here and met a lot of people. I know that there are always going to be people who don't believe that you can do something or people who are your biggest supporters...I've made great relationships here and I've made great bonds and great friendships, and those are the people who will always support you. But there are also people who are going to discourage you and there are people who think that something may not be within your reach. So, I think that I've learned to accept those people and then to accept the people who do believe in me and just take it all in and use it as a driving force to do what it is that I want to do. I think I've become a lot more accepting and open to new things.

Part of the transformation involved “breakthrough moments” when students were finally able to figure things out such as understanding what they needed to do to be successful or resolving time and money management chal-

lenges. A male student spoke about his epiphany:

The most exciting moment I've had...has been [when] I got my grades all back up to passing; whenever I got [serious about] my studying, like I figured it out. I figured out everything I needed to do. I figured out how I needed to study. I figured out how much I need to study and for what classes, and [when] I need to go to study groups and all the friends I've made while doing this. I figured out how to balance working and going to school. Figuring all this out [and] the moment I realized— 'hey, I've got things; hey, I can be here, I can do this'—that has been my most exciting moment, just that realization, that little breakthrough.

Another male student reported a breakthrough when he realized that majoring in business was not in his best interests which resulted in switching his major to engineering. He said:

I continued in my major (business) because I wasn't [correctly advised]. I don't want to blame anybody. I don't want to blame all the counselors for not telling me what to take. That's my fault. I'm the one that made that decision. I was taking business and I had to take [an] astronomy class as a science class and I saw all this math again, and it started coming to me. I was like, God I love this. I enjoyed it, and that's when I switched things to...engineering. Then in engineering, I was [taking] electrical engineering, and I was taking computer engineering, and I took a computer science class, and that's when I was like— 'wait a minute, this is what I want to do.'

The Downside of the Latin@ College Experience

While uplifting, inspiring and exciting, attending college also had a downside for students who were faced with formidable challenges associated with transitioning and adapting to the foreign world of college, a dynamic which has been previously discussed in the research literature on Latin@ students (Delgado Bernal, 2010; Nora, 2001-02; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). The preparation these Latin@ get to negotiate very difficult challenges is unclear, but the fact that students managed to deal with complex transitional issues speaks to their intelligence and sheer determination to stay in college. The complexities of transitioning are described below.

Entre Mundos: Navigating Multiple Worlds

A high degree of social and emotional intelligence is

needed for low-income, first-generation students to deal with the tensions and complexities associated with transitioning from their personal, familiar worlds to the foreign world of college. Figure 1 exemplifies how students lived “*entre mundos*” (among multiple worlds). These spaces included their personal contexts of family, peers, work, spiritual, barrio and native country, as well as the unfamiliar territory of college. Clearly, students were called to stretch their capacity to navigate the tensions of constantly shifting contexts, deal with the psychological and emotional wounds of culture shock, negotiate separation anxiety and to work through the tensions of dislocation and relocation.

To operate *entre mundos*, students had to learn to deal with the following complex, highly-demanding dynamics:

Dealing with *Choque*/Cultural Collision

As students move from their familiar realities to the foreign context of college, they can experience what Anzaldúa (1999) calls *un choque* or cultural collision—see Figure 1. Scholars (Boyte, 2014; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000; Stephens, et al., 2012) have noted that there is a cultural mismatch between low-income and upper-class cultural norms that can create a social performance gap and reproduce social inequalities. For instance, norms such as “doing your own thing” and “realizing your own potential” can run counter to values of some

first-generation students who typically focus on “giving back” and “collective success.” Further, the world of college includes academic values and conventions such as merit and independence along with specific formal and informal forms of language expression, codes of behavior and belief systems, which are often foreign to first-generation, low-income students. One Latino male put it this way:

One of the things that was very difficult was transitioning. I think maybe lots of college students have that, maybe even more so Latinos have that where they have to transition to something new that you’ve never experienced, that maybe you never thought of before... Academically, preparing was one of the things that I had to really learn to adapt...

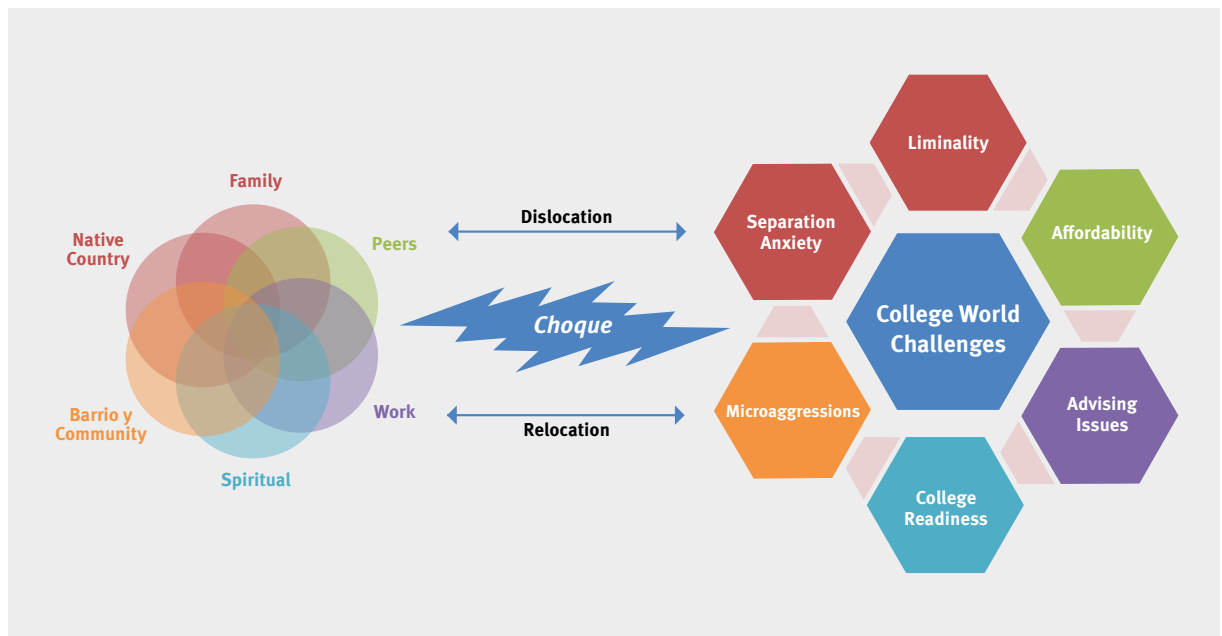
Ultimately, students were able to figure out how to succeed, but they did struggle. A Latino male explained that he would have liked his professors to understand the things he struggled with in college:

...Not being able to understand some of the subjects that they’re talking about, some of the words that I do not understand and that I kind of have to, myself, look [up] those things and research those things.

Experiencing Liminality

The transition to college was not linear in nature. Figure

FIGURE 1. *Entre Mundos: Navigating the Transition to College*



1 depicts how Latin@ students lived “*entre mundos*,” as students tended to move back and forth among multiple personal and academic contexts. Personal worlds included family, peers, work, spiritual, *barrio*/community, and native country (for students who were born and stayed connected to Mexico or to other Latin American countries of origin).

A liminal space is an “in-between” space, *nepantla* as Anzaldúa (1999) would call it, where threshold students can find themselves caught and pulled in one or more operating contexts. It can also include the experience of feeling like one is neither here nor there, *ni aqui, ni aya*. When one straddles multiple contexts, one cannot help but experience liminality. Transitioning to college was no exception, as students found themselves trying to adapt to a new world while staying connected to their old one. The transition to college created a very vulnerable liminal space where some students had doubts about whether college was really worth the effort and whether college was really meant for them. During this adjustment period, some students had earned low grades. Some reported feeling intimidated, lost and/or lonely. Straddling between the world of college and their treasured family life, students also felt the cultural pull from their families and friends who saw them struggling and instinctively sought to help them the only way they knew how—by encouraging them to return home. A Latino recalled this experience by saying:

Yes, a lot of them have actually told me to come back a lot of times. They’ve said, you know, I see you struggling, but why are you doing that? You know you can just come back and live at home and then you don’t have to pay for gas or pay for food. You are going to have stuff taken care of and you can work here, and you’ve got all your friends and family here; just come home.

Experiencing Separation Anxiety

Students experienced separation anxiety as they made efforts to stay connected to family and friends who chose not to leave their home communities. For instance, a Latino male student expressed the impact of leaving his family behind:

What I think was really hard was leaving my mom and my brother behind. ...I was always there for them, ...I was the man of the house. I had to ...be there for him and for my mom. ...financially, I was always struggling. I didn’t know how ...it [was] going to work, but my mom [said]..., ‘Don’t worry about

it, it’s going to work.’ ...financial[ly], and leaving my family behind was the hardest part.

Recalling her first year in college, a Latina student explained her initial months on campus:

...it was kind of hard to leave at the beginning...as soon as you’re away you kind of start to feel, you know, homesick, or whatever it is. It took me about a year to [get over feeling]... homesick... And, whenever they are constantly telling me about things, which you want to stay informed with your family, ...you’re kind of like: ‘Well, you know I wish I could have been there.’ Or, if you know there is a death in the family, you’re not there so it kind of becomes difficult to sit there and take it.

A Latino male indicated how he dealt with traversing multiple worlds and separating from friends:

The way I move around these worlds of my college life, my high school friends and my family life is a lot more difficult because I try to keep in contact with my friends who didn’t leave.

At the same time this student employed his determination and sense of giving back to his family to acknowledge that separating could also mean that his example could help his family later on in life. He said:

I feel like I’m just deserting my family sometimes. I have to remind myself that that’s not true, that what I’m doing with my life—where I want to go with my life—it is not only going to help me, but I’ll be able to help take care of my family later on and that, for the younger members of my family... my little brother and little sister and my little cousins...they see—my cousin can do that or my brother did that—so I know I can do that...I want to go to college. I want to get out of this town. I want to make something with my life...

Negotiating Dislocation and Relocation

All students experienced some form of geographical and/or educational dislocation and relocation to wind up at UTSA, such as: breaking away from high school, transferring from a community college to UTSA, moving from one state to another, or moving from a foreign country to the U.S. For example, one female student had spent the first 12 years of her life in Juárez, Mexico. She came to the U.S. as an undocumented student and completed a high school diploma in San Antonio, Texas, graduating in the top 10% of her class. She then attended San Antonio College for one year and

subsequently moved to California where she completed an Associate of Arts Degree with an emphasis in math and physics at Solano Community College. From there, she returned to Texas enrolling at The University of Texas at San Antonio where she was presently a fourth-year student majoring in mechanical engineering with a minor in chemistry. The navigational sophistication and resilience this previously undocumented student employed while traversing two nations, two states and several educational institutions is remarkable. The student commented on her multiple transitions:

Well, the impact of moving back and forth between Juárez and the U.S., I don't know how I did it. I guess when I first moved to the U.S. from Juárez I was kind of forced to adapt to it. I mean I had no other option. I was only 12 and my parents moved me here so it was not like I could just go back, but at first I did not like it at all. I did not want to be here. I was just like... we were immigrants, it wasn't as easy for us to go back and live with family or friends. So, it was literally abandoning our family and my friends when we moved... to start a whole new life.

Experiencing Microaggressions

For students of color, navigating a new college world often involves experiences with racial and gender microaggressions (Minikel-Lacocque, 2012; Sue, 2010). Representative of Latin@ students' microaggressions were: being made to feel embarrassed for playing Spanish music, being treated as cultural outsiders, being laughed at for cooking ethnic foods in a residence hall, and dealing with perceptions that Latina females were not intelligent enough to be enrolled in STEM majors. Further, Latino males were sometimes viewed as "short" and unable to play popular college sports (e.g. basketball), and students reported perceptions that Latin@ were recruited only to qualify UTSA as an HSI. Some students were teased because of an accent or were made to feel as though they weren't as smart as white students. A male student remarked on how he had tried to offer academic assistance to a non-Latino student in his engineering class only to face a hurtful response:

It was in the recitation period from my electrical engineering class. In that period, we just go over the class work and they give us problems to do and we run a lot of formulas through programs and things like that... I remember this one instance that we were all working and there was a student next to me who was really having trouble with the program that we were running. He couldn't figure out the formula. He couldn't figure out how to plug it in right and make it

run. I told him that I could help him. I was like, hey, do you need my help, and he looked at me and [it] was like, no, I'm fine. This was a non-Latino student. He continued to struggle and ...constantly asked other non-Latino students [for help]. Everybody he asked for help was non-Latino or non-minority...I just kind of took that personally, and it honestly kind of hurt. It made me realize like, well, maybe not everything about being here is so much better...I think that was one of my more negative moments of being here.

A Latina student expressed that speaking in Spanish created some tensions with her roommates:

For me, um, I'm from the Valley. So, pretty much everybody is Latino, Latina. ...I always felt like safe. So then, ...I came here and there is such a huge diversity and my roommate – I lived with three other roommates - and all three of them were white. So, I remember the first time I was in the living room talking to my mom, obviously in Spanish. And then, after I hung up the phone they were just like, like the whole entire time we were talking (my mom and I were talking), they were like just staring at me. I was like, 'Guys, calm down. It's just a different language.'

Challenges Associated with Financing College and Making Academic Progress

The burden of paying for college, experiencing lack of college readiness and getting inadequate advising weighed heavily on students.

Financial Burden and Concerns about College Affordability

Students were not only concerned about paying for college; they were also worried about their families' financial burden. A Latina student shared her thoughts regarding her financial circumstances:

The reason I chose UTSA is... because my father lost his job my graduating year [in high school] and I was working. So, coming here allowed me to still go to school and work off-campus. I also work here on campus as well, so that way I can help my parents out by paying for most of the school expenses myself and then helping them out here and there when I can.

Latino males played a significant role in the family when it came to finances. For instance, a Latino male student revealed that he worried about leaving his mother and brother behind because, "I was basically the man of the house." He shared how the family of three was already struggling financially and recalled the difficult conversa-

tion he had with his mom asking, “How are we going to afford college?”

Lack of College Readiness

Students expressed how sometimes they felt their high school preparation was inadequate. Two male students addressed the lack of rigor in their high school curriculum:

In my senior year in high school, I would just literally [only] take a pen [to school], just a pen for senior year. I remember after I graduated ...coming here [UTSA] and ...felt like I wasted all my time in high school because I learned literally nothing. The homework I received in high school was nothing compared with the stuff that I have to know here; there is just [such] a big gap.

I think...a lot of people...say, ‘Yeah, after this [high school] I’m going to college,’ but what they don’t realize [is that] there is such a big gap and then you get to college and it’s entirely different.

Less than Adequate Advising

Advising was a real issue for most students as they went through the maze of registering and basically trying to navigate a new campus life. A male student noted:

I know the difficulty I had was in trying to register for UTSA. Getting my official transcripts over to UTSA, that was easy enough, but having to come back and talk to...academic advisors and trying to register and everything with the business office [was difficult]. There were lots of times where people either seemed like they didn’t know what they were doing or just didn’t care enough to really follow up and figure out exactly what needed to be done. A lot of times it seemed like they just wanted to wash their hands of it [the whole advising time] or just give an answer quickly and then like: okay, now I’m done with you and let’s hurry up to the next person.

Another female student commented about the impact of having been misadvised and provided with the incorrect academic plan:

Coming in, they had my credits to be an engineer. So, I should have been here [at UTSA] this year and next year and graduated in the [following] class. So, I was a little concerned that maybe there weren’t so many classes available, knowing I was going to be an upper classman. So I contacted my [high school] advisor and he assured me that they would find a way to get me into the classes that I needed.

So, when I got here [to UTSA] the advisor that was [assigned] ...to me [at]...orientation day to enroll me - I guess maybe a miscommunication happened —I was put on the wrong academic plan.

Attending college brought both significant benefits and arduous challenges to low-income Latin@ students. What were the assets and cultural knowledge students employed to survive in college and to overcome challenges? To answer this question, data derived primarily from the six individual interviews were analyzed. Asset-based theories outlined in Table 3 provided the conceptual framing to illuminate the diverse array of assets and ways of knowing Latin@ students employed to gather strength, work through personal and academic difficulties, negotiate multiple worlds and stay on track to complete college. In the absence of these assets, and without anyone in their family or in college being able or willing to provide assistance, it would not be an over-statement to say that students would have dropped out of college.



VENTAJAS Y CONOCIMIENTOS: ASSETS AND FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

The research literature has recognized that Latin@ students have strengths and knowledge rooted in their ancestry, community, family and identity (Delgado Bernal, 2010; Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal & Villenas, 2010; Moll, Amanti & González, 2001; Yosso, 2005). They also have what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “*conocimientos*,” a consciousness that evolves in the process of developing a new awareness as one goes through specific life experiences. Anzaldúa elaborates: “*Conocimiento*” is just a good old-fashioned word that means knowledge, or learning, or *lo que conoces* {what you know}. When you’re about to change, when something in your life is transforming itself, you get this ‘Aha! So this is what it’s about.’ That to me is *conocimiento*” (Anzaldúa as told to Lara, 2005).

In this essay, *ventajas* refers to the assets or personal resources these six students possessed, while *conocimientos* will be associated with the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 2001) associated with each of these *ventajas*. Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model was employed as a starting point to identify multiple *ventajas/assets* these students possessed and employed to their advantage. Yosso’s framework, which includes six forms of cultural wealth, was substantiated by the research findings. Moreover, the study uncovered four additional forms of *ventajas y conocimientos*.

Validating Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model

As noted in Table 3, there are six forms of capital

in Yosso’s (2005) model which were confirmed in this study.

Aspirational

Students were able to be hopeful about their future and to set aspirations to attend college, as well as to enter professions such as engineering, science or politics. A male student expressed: “Me and my twin brother, we both had aspirations of going to college. I remember we would go late into the night and just talked about our aspirations of going to college and making a difference.” These aspirations were often shaped by validating agents (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents) who shared *testimonios*/life stories on overcoming adversity and who provided support and *consejos*/sage advice. Community role models also served to foster aspirations and hope for the future. For example, one male student indicated that:



“As a Latino I want to be that [San Antonio] Mayor Julian Castro for somebody else, like he was for me, like Joaquin Castro for my brother, or for myself. I want to be that person where I can sort of help that other student, Latino or non-Latino, to say that this shaped me, that I can do this, so anybody else can do this as well.”

Linguistic

While some students were cognizant that they had a Spanish accent and were sometimes teased about their accent, they also recognized that being bilingual in Spanish and English helped them to communicate and to form relationships with others. A Puerto Rican woman explained that she felt her mother had advantaged her by teaching her to speak two languages at an early age. She said she had appreciated “what it means to be bilingual” since she was a small child, noting the advantage in understanding what others had to say and being able to communicate in two different languages. With regard to the importance of linguistic capital in forming relationships, a Latino male expressed the importance of speaking Spanish: “If you are Latino you’ll always have a group of friends. You can find somebody that speaks Spanish in a classroom and just start talking Spanish to them, and they want you to be in their study group or something, just because you can speak and communicate with them.”

Familial

For all students the family served as a critical source of support, with mothers playing an especially central role. The accumulation of familial capital was gained through validation, *consejos*, and role modeling, thus establishing students’ personal determination to complete life goals not only for themselves but also for their family. A male underscored the value of his mother’s *consejos* and information: “My mom gave me all the information and all the strength I needed to go to college and to get through college. She always told me, you need to go. You have to go.” A previously undocumented female student expressed how family helped form her personal determination: “What has made me determined? My family... I think that is what is helping me be determined, the fact that I want to help my family, and that’s what I want to do.” This student had also acquired her sense of determination from the example of her father’s experiences:

I mean, one of the things I really like about my dad is the fact that even though he only went up to the fourth grade, he still was able to learn enough, you know, electrician work to be able to fix the house, and now construction to be able to build something for the family - just that feeling to want to learn and to want to help.

Social

Peer networks proved to be essential to students. They capitalized on their friendships with peers, the social networks that were formed with their friends, and lessons learned from their interactions with peers in developing an important asset—social capital. Research documents the importance of peers for personal support, political engagement, and fostering a sense of belonging on campus (Hallett, 2013; Moreno & Sánchez Banuelos, 2013). While all of the students expressed the value of diversity and learning from different cultures, they were especially able to rely on networks formed with other Latin@. Acquiring this form of social capital came through interactions experienced in the Hispanic Student Association (HSA) and through study groups—safe spaces where students validated each other with hugs, appreciation, and affirmation that what one person was going through was the experience of much of the others. A male student captured the general sentiment of all six students that were interviewed:

Since my freshman year...I’ve been a part of HSA, the Hispanic Student Association, and just the connections that I’ve made in this organization and the friends I’ve made in this organization have helped with the transition. This organization makes it feel like a family, and a lot of the people in this organization are not just freshmen, they are sophomores, juniors, seniors; some are grad students. They’ve been here and they know what it’s like and a lot of them actually have been helping with that transition.

...Going to my first meeting of the HSA...as soon as I walked in I had five people come up and greet me, and they introduced themselves and they gave me a hug, and I’m like, I just met you. Why are you hugging me? That’s how it is; that’s how everybody here is, just so welcoming and nice that even I’ve gotten to where if I introduce myself to someone...and it’s the first time...I’ll give them a hug.

Navigational

Navigating within multiple, distinct worlds (*barrio*, peers, native country, family, spiritual, college) was a key strategy to survive in higher education. Each new context had its own mental script and language code, as well as its own intellectual and behavioral conventions. A Latina expressed the distinctions between her family context and the world of college:

College is very different. I see it as I have a college life and I have my personal life. When I’m in school, I am in slow motion. I know how to speak to people about courses and how to do projects and what I

have to do in the future. I want to go to graduate school and I want to do this and that. When I'm with my parents there is no school talk other than how are you doing and how long is it going to take you to graduate. They just—I don't think they fully understand what I actually do at school. All they see is I'm going to school and I've been married. I don't have any kids; how long is that going to take. That's pretty much what I'm getting from my parents. I just think that they just don't know so it's like two different worlds. I live in multiple worlds.

It was pretty crazy. Honestly, I mean it wasn't like psychologically I feel sad [or] I don't have a home, ... it was like OK, now this is my home,... but everywhere I went I felt that place was my home...and making new friends all the time. California was the first one I went to, and, I mean, I spoke English, but mostly I understood it a little bit. I couldn't really communicate. I couldn't have, like, a full conversation all the time, so that was really, really hard. You can imagine. When I went back to Bolivia and then back to Utah again it was like starting from zero. I spoke English, but I didn't have any friends...It was kind of hard.

Another example is a Latino student who had dislocated from Santa Cruz, Bolivia at age 12 to come to California. He then returned to Bolivia for a year and subsequently returned to the U.S. in Utah. This was followed by a return to Bolivia. He expressed the chaos of constant dislocation and relocation, while at the same time having to navigate these contrasting contexts:

Resistant

As noted earlier, students experienced racial and gender microaggressions, as well as culture shock in college. Having gone through those experiences, these students acquired yet another important asset—resistant capital,

TABLE 3. Asset-Based Theoretical Frameworks

| Theory | Theorist(s) | Key Points |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Community Cultural Wealth | Tara Yosso (2005) | Cultural wealth includes the following forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, <i>familial</i> , social, navigational, and resistant. These forms of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts are utilized by Communities of Color to survive and to combat oppressive circumstances. |
| Funds of Knowledge | Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff & Norma Gonzalez (2001) | Funds of knowledge “refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being (p. 133).” Faculty can potentially draw out hidden talents in students when they get to know them and when they acknowledge and validate their backgrounds, culture, family sacrifices, and challenges they have overcome. |
| <i>Meztiza</i> Consciousness | Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) | The constant crossing over and the racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination results in a new <i>mestiza</i> consciousness, <i>una conciencia de mujer</i> . Psychic restlessness can occur as a result of occupying liminal spaces, of being in a state of perpetual transition, and of living between two cultures—a state called “ <i>nepantla</i> .” While <i>nepantla</i> can be messy and confusing, it is also the site where transformation can occur, new knowledge can emerge, worldviews can be shattered, personal growth can occur, and new identities can emerge. |
| Pedagogies of the Home | Dolores Delgado-Bernal (2010) | Pedagogies of the home constitute the cultural knowledge bases and strategies of resistance students employ to survive in educational systems that are alien to them and that often cast students with deficit-based frameworks. |
| Validation | Laura I. Rendón (1994) | Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and personal development. Students benefit when others believe in them, and when they provide affirmation, support and encouragement. |
| Liberatory Pedagogy | Paulo Freire (1971), Laura Rendón (2009), bell hooks, 1994 | Promotes that education should: incorporate an inclusive curriculum, be relationship-centered, honor diverse ways of knowing, take action against multiple forms of oppression, and focus on social justice, diversity, and interdependence. Endorses student ability to think critically about educational situations and welcomes student voice in the classroom. |

one that they came to depend on as they faced the different academic and social barriers and obstacles in college. For example, one female engineering student indicated how she was able to overcome being intimidated in classes dominated by White males:

At the beginning, ...you're first welcomed to the class and all you see are White males. It's intimidating... their conversations [dealt]...about cars and like how they're going out on the weekends and meet girls...I just didn't have any connection with that so it was a bit intimidating. They were white males... [and] ...coming from a family [whose]...parents went to college, who maybe ...never had in mind [questions] about whether they were going to be able to go to school. They just kind of knew they were going to be able to go to school and they had school in mind since they were little, so they've had time to adjust to it. I...just...felt intimidated and way at a disadvantage. But I kind of thought through it, and I eventually got used to it.

Additional Forms of Cultural Wealth: Ventajas Latin@ Employed in College

An exciting discovery was four new *ventajas* (assets) not covered in Yosso's (2005) model. These include: *ganancias*/determination, ethnic consciousness, spirituality/faith, and pluriversal cultural wealth.

Ganas/Perseverance

Underlying this *ventaja* is determination, self-reliance and inner confidence. Admirably, students were refusing to quit, and they also recognized and embraced the sacrifice that must be made in going to college. Overall, the life experiences and circumstances of students paint a picture of hardships and adversities that one would think they would not be able to overcome, but they did. Students were able to overcome difficult life challenges such as being undocumented, lacking role models and mentors in their communities, experiencing poverty, attending poorly-resourced schools, being placed in a vocational track in high school, becoming the man of the house at an early age after experiencing the death of a father, dislocating from native country, and constantly moving from one geographical and/or educational context to another.

One female student's expression of this asset was succinct:

I know what I want to be and I know what I need to get there so I just have to make sure I do it. That's all there is. I mean, I hate it and I'm complaining every

time I have to write a report. I complain every time where something is missing in the lecture, and I have to read the book. I mean, I'm complaining throughout the whole way, but I'm still doing it. I think that's what's gotten me this far, that I'm still doing it.

A male student indicated that his mother's story pushed him to go to college:

The fact that my mom only went to business school. She has always told me my whole life that she regrets not going to college. She regrets not making that choice, and I think that's what pushed me to go to college a little bit more. That was something ... in the back of my head pushing me... I didn't want to... struggle the way they did. I don't want my kids to... struggle with what I did growing up, you know, not having enough money or having to see my parents work three jobs, not seeing them until night time [when they] come home from their job[s], just because she didn't have the degree necessary to get a higher job.

Ethnic Consciousness

When Latin@ are confronted with similar social and educational inequities, these conditions may serve as a basis to foster solidarity and unity resulting in what Padilla (1985) called "ethnic consciousness." What appeared evident was a form of ethnic consciousness that manifested itself as students felt a deep sense to "give back" to their families and communities. Ethnic consciousness, as the title implies, involves cultural pride and the sense that personal accomplishment could lead to the betterment of the Latin@ collective whole. Further, students were overwhelmingly proud of their heritage and proud to attend an Hispanic-Serving Institution, evidence of the cultural pride embedded within the *ventaja*.

For example, a Latino student expressed how he foresaw that perhaps he could be a role model for his siblings:

...What made me decide that I [didn't] want to do vocational [school] over maybe going to a four-year college was...looking up the jobs and opportunities... I could get a lot further with an electrical engineering degree and realizing that I'm setting an example for my little brother and my little sister... I want them to make the most out of their lives...

A Latina expressed her perception of the cultural responsibility to set an example for those who came behind her:

I'm one of the first, pretty much the one setting up the test for the ones that are coming behind me, and that means that, whatever decisions I make or whatever path I choose to take, it's not only going to affect me...it's going to affect everyone that comes behind me, whether it's my sisters, my neighbor, or just any female or Latina that's the next generation, and that's pretty scary because it's not just me anymore.

A Latina engineering student articulated another example of the desire to “give back” when describing the reason she had joined an organization called Engineers Without Borders.

I believe my purpose in life [was that]...I was given these skills to, like, love math, to be good with numbers and to be able to pursue engineering... to use civil engineer [training] ...to build a community or help other people [and] other communities outside of the United States in other countries, and help them rebuild some of their countries and stuff. Like, for example, I want to go to Panama and build them a few houses and stuff like that. So I think my purpose in life is to, like, use my skills to help others.

Spirituality/Faith

Interestingly, many students came to the interviews wearing religious necklaces and bracelets, and they often referred to their faith in God to gather strength and to cope with difficult situations. They also appeared to be guided by a broader sense of spirituality such as gratitude, compassion and a sense of purpose in life, as well as a positive view of the world. Nora and Anderson (2002) found a distinction between the concepts of spirituality and religiosity. One aspect is that being spiritual means having a positive worldview of others and society. In line with that view are the notions that how we treat each other and how we see the world in general is positively affected by a sense of spiritual nobility. Religiosity is represented by a faith in God or a higher power and communicated through the performance and adherence to religious rituals and beliefs. Both spirituality and faith appeared to be key to giving students strength, comfort and determination to succeed, as well as a sense of humanitarianism.

One male student exemplified the importance of faith in God:

One of the things that I have, culturally, is having faith in God. I think that's something that really identifies [resonates] within the Latino community. I know myself I will go late into the night and pray

to God:...thank you for another day, thank you for helping me with these opportunities that are presenting themselves. Sometimes you're not going to understand [those] ...circumstances that are going throughout your life, but I think being a Latino, having faith ...in God, I think that's something that really pushes you toward the best of your beliefs.

Several students expressed a broader sense of spirituality. For example, a male student who had a rough childhood with no role models or a father figure student said:

I feel my purpose in life is to leave an example, leave a mark that says I did this. I made something of myself...the kind of mark that says he did this, so you can do this.

A female noted that her purpose in life was to be a good person attuned to others:

So what that entails is being compassionate to others, being understanding of others (you don't know what other people go through), being positive because in every [negative] circumstance that you may be going through, there is always somebody else who is going through something much worse than you. So, ...just trying to stay positive, being the hands and feet of God and just being a good person.

A young man indicated the importance of helping others:

I could have asked for anything that maybe has the most money...but to me it's helping people, giving a hand, listening to their concerns, voicing their concerns...I turn to God. I just pray to Him and ask, what is my purpose in life?

Pluriversal

Andreotti, Ahenakew and Cooper (2012) articulate the notion that in non-Western conceptualizations of knowledge production, competing and contradictory systems of meaning can be held “in tension without having to come to a dialectical synthesis or resolution” (p. 221). Pluriversal or multiepistemic perspectives run counter to Western hegemonic conceptions that are focused on either/or thinking as opposed to “both, and” perspectives. Students in this study were able to function with pluriversality similar to what Anzaldúa (1999) terms “*mestiza* consciousness.” The versatility of being able to make identity and behavioral shifts while operating in multiple, diverse worlds (i.e., being a college student as well as a family member, a peer, or a community member) likely gave students a tolerance for





ambiguities and contradictions. For example, engaging in professional, academic roles in class is different than engaging with a parent, sibling, or with a friend back home in a much more informal manner. This ability to move in and out of these different spaces and intellectual/social understandings and to engage successfully in all of them speaks to the asset of pluriversality.

A female student in the study indicated that she could be conscious of how she would respond to others depending on the context she found herself in:

A simple question such as, what are you planning to do in 10 years from now?...If I'm speaking to someone at school I would immediately refer to graduate school where I might want to do research or what school I'm planning to go to. If I'm speaking to my parents it would be where I'm planning to live, whether I want to have kids, or if I'm planning to travel. Same question but different answers because of two different worlds.

A Latino male expressed the complexities of his identity:

I'm proud of where my family came from Mexico. I have ties to my family's Mexican heritage, but I'm Mexican American because...I was born here and I'm still American too. I also define myself as Hispanic because a lot of people will try and classify me as say, Spanish, and to me that means that my family came over from Spain.

A Latina born in Mexico indicated how she had to relearn Spanish and to embrace both her immigrant and American identity as she became more comfortable living in the United States:

...I sort of relearned to be proud of being Mexican and being an immigrant and what it means to be an immigrant...Then we were able to travel back to Juárez. It was like going through this whole thing all over again because, even though I'm Mexican and I grew up there when I was little, it's not the same thing. Like you miss your whole teenage years spending them with your friends and your cousins and now, to them, you are considered American. While here you're considered an immigrant, even though you are no longer [an immigrant].



LEVERAGING LATIN@ STUDENTS VENTAJAS Y CONOCIMIENTOS

This section provides examples of leveraging strategies that are aligned with Latin@ student assets and ways of knowing discussed in this essay. For each student *ventaja*/asset a list of *conocimientos*/funds of knowledge are noted, which can be leveraged to foster student success—see Table 4.

One of the key assets students possess is aspirational. To leverage this *ventaja* advisers and counselors should form validating and mentoring (Nora & Crisp, 2008; Rendón, 1994) relationships with students to fine tune their aspirations and to affirm that they have the capacities and strengths to realize their hopes and dreams. Students should also be advised regarding academic and student support services which can help them move forward with addressing any academic and/or college adjustment problems they may be experiencing. This can happen in first-year experience programs and in a one-stop Student Success Center to help students obtain needed information about admissions, financial aid, and support programming. Engaging students in peer language tutoring, study abroad experiences, intergroup dialogues, and opportunities to develop language competencies can leverage a student's linguistic asset. Family represents a very important *ventaja* for Latin@ students. Leveraging this strength can include hosting family events on campus, forming familia study groups, and participating in living-learning communities where students can form their own "*familia*" with peers.

Another key *ventaja* is related to the ability to create social networks, make new friends and form new relationships. Faculty and student affairs staff could work with social assets through study groups where students

can learn from and support each other, collaborative learning assignments, as well as relationship-centered learning communities and ethnic-themed college clubs and organizations. Students do have navigational skills, though clearly there were challenges associated with the transitioning and with learning the new world of college. Latin@ and feminist studies programs could help students find a safe space where they can share their *testimonios* (life stories) and learn with students with similar educational and life journeys. An example is the Office of Multicultural Excellence at the University of Denver that houses programs (i.e., Voices of Discovery Dialogues and first-generation student support groups) where small groups of students from varied backgrounds can share their life and campus experiences as they confront a college culture that is vastly different from their home realities.

Leveraging the asset of resistance could include peer support groups and counseling to assist students to combat microaggressions and to help students to heal from any negative situations they may have experienced, for example, racism, stereotyping and public embarrassment. *Ganas*, or perseverance, is a *ventaja* connected to drive to succeed. Leveraging practices could include a theoretically-grounded mentoring initiative involving academic and student support offices to encompass career preparation, realistic self-assessment, and academic advising.

Students with an ethnic consciousness are driven by the notion that their success is not just for themselves; it is also to lift the Latin@ community. This is an especially important asset that can be enhanced through service learning in underserved communities, research and program development with a social justice minded faculty or staff member, and ethnic-themed learning communities such as the Puente Project that includes a Latin@ - centered curriculum. In addition, a liberatory pedagogy which focuses on social justice issues can be helpful in affirming and strengthening the commitment to the Latin@ collective.

Another strong *ventaja* is that of spirituality/faith where students express faith in God or a higher power and have a sense of purpose, compassion and goodness. Leveraging practices could include faith-based organi-

zations and holiday celebrations, service learning, and capstone courses. Contemplative pedagogy also holds promise in fostering a sense of meaning and purpose and to provide a holistic learning experience that activates inner and outer learning. With carefully trained faculty inner learning can be activated employing contemplative practices. Among many examples include use of music, ritual and poetry, journaling, arts-based projects, and mindfulness (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.; Shapiro et al., 2011; Rendón, 2009; & Rendón & Kanagala, 2014). To be pluriversal means that one can hold multiple and sometimes competing systems of meaning in tension. Leveraging practices could include peer mentoring and advising to assist students as attempt to negotiate multiple identities and function in diverse cultural contexts.

TABLE 4. Leveraging Latin@ Student Ventajas y Conocimientos

| <i>Ventajas/Assets</i> | <i>Conocimientos¹/Knowledge (Ability to)</i> |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Aspirational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set high aspirations • Recognize value of education • Remain hopeful about the future |
| Linguistic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ two or more languages • Engage with formal and informal modes of expression |
| <i>Familial</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model the strength and determination of the family • Employ knowledge gained through the value of family <i>consejos, respeto, testimonios, y educación</i> |
| Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create social networks • Make new friends and form new relationships |
| Navigational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate in liminal spaces • Traverse multiple, distinct social contexts • Dislocate and relocate • Adapt to new culture |
| Resistant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resist stereotypes, combat and overcome microaggressions • Overcome hardships, such as poverty and lack of guidance and resources |
| <i>Ganas/</i> Perseverance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop inner strength, become self-reliant and determined to succeed • Recognize and embrace sacrifices that must be made to attend college |
| Ethnic Consciousness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form deep commitment to Latino community and to betterment of collective—sense of “giving back” • Develop cultural pride • Develop pride in attending Hispanic-Serving Institution |
| Spirituality/Faith | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ faith in God/higher power to overcome struggles • Develop sense of meaning and purpose • Embrace concepts such as gratitude, goodness and compassion |
| Pluriversal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate in multiple worlds/diverse educational and geographical contexts (college, peers, work, family, spiritual, native country) • Hold multiple and competing systems of meaning in tension |

¹Anzaldúa, 2005





CONCLUSION

The findings from this study clearly substantiate that deficit-based perspectives based on assumptions that most low-income, first-generation Latin@ students have no ambition, are not capable of knowing, lack motivation and are a lost cause are egregiously erroneous. Student success frameworks are incomplete without consideration of the diverse array of cultural wealth that Latin@ bring to college. College faculty and staff need to learn more about the low-income Latin@ student college experience, reframe their assumptions about students from poverty backgrounds and work with an asset-based framework to foster success.

Another message from this study is that there is hope for Latin@ student success. The student profile that emerged from this study speaks to extraordinary strengths and drive to succeed, as well as the ability to become transformed from the college experience. It cannot be denied that some of these students needed more academic skills (though many were clearly very smart). But what pushed these students was their firm commitments to their families and to the Latin@ community, the notion that they now served as role models for others in similar situations, their ability to use bilingualism to their benefit, their ability to resist microaggressions and to serve as personal support systems for their peers, and their remarkable capacity to maneuver themselves both in the foreign world of college and in their familiar personal worlds. The profile of these Latin@ students was also one of sheer determination and drive to succeed, of having a deep sense to “give back” to their communities, to have a purpose in life, and to function with an intellectual consciousness of

pluriversality, a critical high-level cognitive skill which is advantageous when oppressed people have to negotiate shifting power structures and cultural conditions.

This knowledge essay identified ten *ventajas y conocimientos* that all educators must learn about and leverage as they work with low-income, first-generation Latin@ students who should not be treated the same as affluent, privileged students. Reinforced with research evidence, it can definitely be asserted that Latin@ students possess an exceptional knowledge base that should be accounted for when developing student success initiatives. When armed with their own toolbox of *ventajas y conocimientos* and assisted with high-quality academics and student support services, Latin@ can definitely complete a college education.



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