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The Persistence and Success of Latino Men in Community College

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latinx student enrollment in postsecondary education has increased from 31% in 2000 to 36% in 2016 (NCES, 2019). With a growing number of the Latinx population in the United States (Guaracha, 2014), it is presumed, incorrectly, that Latinx students are attending four-year universities at high rates. While the number of Latinx students entering post-secondary education has grown, it has increased dramatically at the community college level than four-year institutions (Benavides, 2018). In 2016, around 70% of Latinx students entering higher education began in the community college sector (Rodriguez et al., 2019). As the disparity in student enrollment between community colleges and four-year universities still persist today, a new disparity in degree completion between Latinas and Latinx men has begun to emerge. Research indicates that Latina students in higher education are twice as likely to receive a four-year college degree compared to Latinx men (Aud, Fox, & Ramani, 2010). With postsecondary enrollment numbers remaining consistent between Latino and Latina women, but graduation and retention numbers showing stark differences, it remains clear that research on the experiences of Latinx men in higher education is critical.

This study presents data from four semi-structured interviews to highlight the experiences of Latinx men in community college and the important factors that influence their transfer success. In this study, I define transfer success as the necessary steps that are taken to transfer to a four-year university (e.g., meeting with a counselor, establishing a strong network, passing a class, etc.). Using a strength-based approach, I examined how aspirational and navigational capital (Yosso, 2015) is displayed in their experiences and how these forms of capital are crucial to their academic success. To guide this study, I focused on the following research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of Latinx men in a community college?
- 2) In what ways are aspirational capital and navigational capital demonstrated in their experiences? How does it influence their transfer success?

Researcher Identity and Positionality

My interest in Latinx students in community college is grounded in my first-hand experience as a self-identified Latina who began my higher education journey at community college. As a first-generation college student, I

acknowledge that the community college system is not easy to navigate, however, individual factors such as my persistence, motivation, and strong value in education influenced me to navigate the transfer process. There were times where I missed deadlines, fluctuated from part-time to full-time, and dropped courses due to financial circumstances. Nonetheless, these situations continued to motivated me to attend my dream university. As a current doctoral student at UCLA, I recognize that I play a privileged, yet marginalized, position (Villenas, 1996). However, I find it crucial to demonstrate the strengths of current community college students to demystify current notions that Latinx men are not prepared, do not have the proper capital, or are not motivated enough to obtain a four-year college degree.

Literature Review

Impact of institutional agents on Latinx men. While scholars have explored why Latinx men underperform in higher education, much of this work has focused on notions of identity conflicts (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016) and limited social capital (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2015). Bukoski and Hatch (2016) examined how Latinx men transition to community college from high school and how their positionality and identity is critical to understanding their academic success. The study found that Latinx men in community college are reluctant to ask for help and have trouble balancing responsibilities. While Bukoski and Hatch intend to find an explanation of why Latinx men have a difficult time in community college, their explanation seems to place the blame on Latinx men rather than trying to understand the reasons why they are reluctant to ask for help in the first place. Similarly, previous research has also argued that having less-educated parents, having limited cultural capital, and being a low-income student also affects Latinx men from transferring to four-year universities (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2015).

Despite the deficit narrative, current research has emphasized the important role of institutional agents on the transfer success of Latinx men. Dowd et al. (2013) interviewed ten community college graduates—five of whom were Latinx men who transferred and obtained a college degree from a four-year university—to examine how institutional agents played a significant role in their transfer success. Results found that all participants had at least one institutional agent (particularly a faculty member or counselor) they felt motivated them to transfer to a four-year university. Latinx men described these institutional agents to be inspirational, fueled their motivation, and provided the necessary guidance needed to transfer (Dowd et al., 2013). Ultimately, institutional agents play a

critical role in influencing the academic success of Latinx men by providing holistic support, humanizing their educational experience, and understanding their social and cultural backgrounds (Museus & Neville, 2012).

Educational aspirations and success of Latinx men in higher education. A smaller number of scholars have taken asset-based approaches to explore the experiences of Latinx men in higher education. While many scholars focus on individual components to explain their underperformance in community college, research also indicates that Latinx students view higher education as an important investment needed for upward mobility (Martinez & Fernández, 2004) even when facing difficult challenges (Pérez, 2017). According to Martinez and Fernández (2004), around 50 to 87% of Latinx students in community college aspire to transfer to a four-year institution. Similarly, Villegas and Garcia (2016) found that Latinx men in community colleges continued to retake dropped or incomplete required transferable English courses because they were determined to complete the mandatory coursework to transfer to a four-year university despite feeling overwhelmed and not supported by their professors. In four-year institutions, Pérez (2017) examined Latinx men's academic determination in selective institutions and found that students' motivation and success were sustained by their cultural wealth. The author found that students' motivation and persistence were maintained due to the challenges they faced during their childhood, their commitment to giving back to their communities, honoring their parents' sacrifices, and through *ganans* (their will to succeed). While data indicates that retention and transfer rates remain low for Latinx men in community college, research makes it clear that Latinx men aspire to transfer and obtain a four-year degree.

Latinx men in community college. Research indicates that more than 80% of Latinx students in community college intend to earn a college degree, however, only 30% of Latinx students actually transfer to a four-year university (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). According to Ornelas and Solorzano (2004), "Latinx students account for less than a quarter of transfers, despite representing one-third of community college students" (p. 234). What is disheartening is how Latinx men are entering community college but are disappearing in far greater numbers than any ethnic/racial group (Villareal & Garcia, 2016). Within a three-year period at a community college, only 17% of Latinx men will obtain an AA or transfer to a four-year university compared to 27% of White men (Xiong et al., 2016). According to the United States Department of Education (2016), 12.9% of Latinx men leave community college within the first year, 35.2% leave within the second year, and by the third year,

Latinx men are less likely to earn an associate degree, or transfer to a four-year university (Martinez, 2004; Suarez, 2017). As a result, researchers and practitioners have increased their focus on understanding and improving the academic outcomes for Latinx men in the higher education system (Harris & Wood, 2013). In the next section, I briefly contextualize this work within the literature by describing the conceptual framework that guides this study—drawing on a strength-based approach to explore the transfer experiences of Latinx men in higher education. I then describe the methodological approach, report the findings of the study, and conclude with a discussion about the importance of conducting research that (a) focuses on the strengths of Latinx men and (b) helps to implement practices that support their academic success.

Conceptual Framework

This study is led by Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. I use community cultural wealth to demonstrate how aspirational and navigational capital are displayed in the narratives of Latinx men in community college and how these forms of capital are influential in their transfer success.

Community cultural wealth. Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework derives from the foundation of critical race theory as the process of using a set of skills and capital to unmask oppressive structures that have a history of marginalizing communities of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Previously, researchers like Bourdieu (1973) mentioned that schools are a part of a broader system of social institutions that advance power relations of certain groups of people all while normalizing ways of being (Jayakumar et al., 2013). These power relations, which are controlled by the elite, are then passed on as valued beliefs through family generations. Through a power relations perspective, Bourdieu claims that those who are of upper- and middle-class families shared a "symbolic form of currency" in school contexts that was respected and preferred, therefore igniting a belief that low-income groups did not possess this currency. Yosso's community cultural wealth framework adds to the existing understandings of cultural capital as proposed by Bourdieu and argues that people of color in fact possess skills, knowledge, and networks that are valuable in a marginalized society. She describes six forms of capital that are within communities of color: familial, linguistic, social, navigational, aspirational, and resistant (Yosso, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, I focused on two of the six forms of capital set forth by Yosso: aspirational and navigational capital. Aspirational capital refers to the individual's ability to remain hopeful and hold high aspirations

despite facing adversity or barriers. Navigational capital refers to the strategies or skills used by marginalized groups to maneuver social institutions (Jayajumar et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005). I decided to focus on these two forms of capital for two reasons: (a) aspirational capital will demonstrate if Latinx men show hopes of obtaining a four-year degree and resilience despite facing challenges; and (b) navigational capital will illustrate the strategies (e.g. talk with institutional agents or use other services/programs) Latinx men use to transfer to a four-year university.

Research Design

Research site. The study was conducted at Huntington Community College, or HCC (pseudonym), a certified Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). HCC is a large two-year public community college that serves more than 26,611 students a semester. Located just 15 minutes from Los Angeles, HCC has an 80% minority enrollment with a 65% Latinx student population. HCC offers 124 associate degree programs, 88 certificates of achievement programs, and 41 noncredit certificate programs. According to the HCC website, HCC is highly recognized for their high transfer rates.

Participants. Four Latinx men from Huntington Community College were recruited to participate in the study. To recruit participants, I passed out flyers during two meetings in two transfer programs (a 2-year social justice transfer program for Latinx students and a program for first-year students). Participants who identified with the following criteria: Hispanic/Latinx, male, and a pre-transfer student emailed me if they wanted to participate in the study. Initially, I was expecting to interview six participants, however, due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and the safer at home guidelines in March 2020 I only interviewed four. To keep participants' identities private, they were given a pseudonym.

Table 1. Participants

Interview #	Name	Age	Year in CC	Major	Aspiration	Transfer
1	Cesar	19	First	History	Teacher	Fall 2023
2	Diego	21	Fourth	Political Science	Immigration Lawyer	Fall 2020
3	Leonard	20	Second	Political	Politician	Fall

	o			Science		2020
4	Luis	19	First	Sociology	Counselor	Fall 2023

Semi-structured Interviews. This study conducted 40- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews. Questions ranged from major decisions, personal challenges, experiences with faculty and counselors, navigating the transfer process, and their academic goals. Participants were compensated \$20 in cash for participating in the study. There were no follow-up interviews, however, participants were encouraged to check their transcript for accuracy.

Data analysis. Each interview was transcribed and coded through inductive and deductive coding methods to compare themes from the data to the conceptual framework (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Three coding processes were applied: an open coding process, an in-vivo coding process, and a theory coding process (Saldaña, 2013). Figure 2 shows an example of an in-vivo category and includes codes that were taken directly from the participant’s transcripts. Figure 3 illustrates a theoretical category which includes codes that stemmed from the literature. To check for reliability and validity, I conducted three rounds of each coding method.

Table 2. Example of an In-vivo Category and Codes

Category	Codes
Motivation	“SELF-MOTIVATED”
	“MY FAMILY”
	“MY FUTURE”

Table 3. Example of a Theoretical Category and Codes

Category	Codes
Use of resources	Program participation
	Staff member
	Faculty member

Validity. The purpose of conducting this study is to present findings that demonstrate the experiences of Latinx men in higher education. For this study, I used two validating strategies: triangulation and participant validation. In data

triangulation, I used semi-structured interviews to find common themes in the data and confirm these themes with what was found in the literature and conceptual framework. The second strategy I used is participant validation. After transcribing each interview, participants were given the opportunity to check the accuracy of their interview transcript. Once they confirmed their responses were accurate, I initiated the coding process. Triangulating the data and engaging in member checks allowed findings to be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Ravitch & Carl, 2006).

Findings

The participants in this study consist of four first through fourth-year community college students. Cesar is a first-generation and first-year Latinx student with aspirations of becoming a history teacher and hopes to transfer to a four-year institution by Fall 2023. Diego is a first-generation, undocumented, and fourth-year Latinx student with aspirations of becoming an immigration lawyer and is transferring to a four-year university in Fall 2020. Leonardo is a first-generation and second-year student with dreams of becoming a politician and was also transferring to a four-year university in Fall 2020. Luis is a first-generation and first-year student at HCC who wants to become a counselor and hopes to transfer to a four-year institution by Fall 2023. While each participant described different challenges, all participants intended to transfer to a four-year university with hopes of a better future for themselves and their families.

Aspirational capital. Responses from the four interviews suggests that there were two main components that influenced aspirational capital: self-motivation and the opportunity to give back.



Figure 1. Aspirational Capital.

Self-motivation—Diego’s story. Two of the four participants mentioned that their aspirations to transfer to a four-year university stemmed from their own motivation to succeed. Diego, a 23-year-old fourth-year undocumented student at HCC, disclosed that he was homeless for the majority of his second year. Diego stated, “I was considering dropping out of school, at times I was so hungry in class that I coughed just so that my classmates couldn’t hear. Being homeless was difficult, but I had to do what I had to do, I reminded myself of who I was doing it for. Myself.” Migrating from Mexico at eight-years old, Diego had learned the meaning of hard work at a young age as he grew up in a single parent household. As an undocumented student, Diego came across situations on campus that reminded him of his status in the United States. He was unaware that there were resources at HCC for undocumented students, so one day he decided to start an undocumented student organization at HCC. Despite living in his car for over a year, Diego passed all six of his classes, maintained a 2.8 GPA, and led the first student organization for undocumented students on campus. Today, Diego is no longer homeless, has created a safe space for undocumented students, and is awaiting admissions decisions from six universities. Diego’s case presents a narrative of the resilience that lives within Latinx men that is driven by self-motivation and hard work. His desire to succeed was not only influenced by his aspirational capital but shaped his desire to transfer to a four-year university and one day become an immigration lawyer.

Motivation to give back—Luis’s story. Fifty percent of participants mentioned that they aspire to transfer to a four-year university to have the opportunity to give back to their community. Luis, who is the oldest of four and a first-year student at HCC, stated, “I am the one that likes to give my friends advice when they need help, so I want to become a counselor you know? I want to give back and advise students who are like me and push them to get an education.” Luis grew up in a low-income community and attended a predominately Latinx high school. He mentioned, “The high school I went to was rough. You can tell teachers had their favorites and because I was going through stuff I wasn’t focused and so I wasn’t a favorite. I hated school but now I want to be a counselor to go help high school students who were like me and were forgotten about.” As a first-year student at HCC, Luis is part of a first-year program that allows him to take English and math courses with the same cohort of students for the academic year. Students are also required to meet with the program counselor. Luis mentioned that the reason he is in the program is because he knows it will keep him on track to transfer to a four-year university. Today, Luis is currently prioritizing his math courses and admits that he is attending tutoring hours because math is his “kryptonite” and understands that without

passing he will not be able to become a counselor. With a desire to pay it forward to students who attend schools like his alma mater, Luis displays a strong sense of ambition in wanting to obtain a college education in order to be equipped with the necessary tools to provide guidance to students who were once in his position. Ultimately, Luis's story provides us with an understanding that Latinx men hold strong aspirations to transfer and obtain a four-year college degree.

Navigational capital. From responses of the four Latinx men in the interview, there were two main components that influenced navigational capital: program participation and faculty.

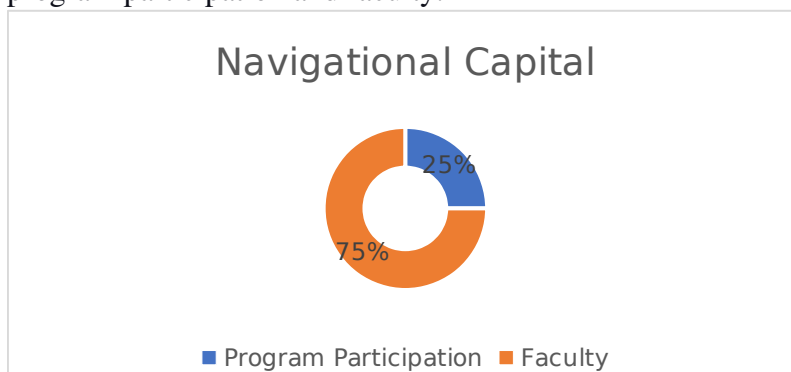


Figure 2. Navigational Capital.

Program participation—Leonardo's story. While all participants made a reference of partaking in special programs, one participant considered the programs to be the most useful resource in the transfer process. Programs include social science programs, financial support programs, or student organizations. Three out of four participants mentioned that they participate in more than two programs at HCC. First-generation and second year community college student, Leonardo mentioned that he is a part of five programs on campus (one transfer program, three student organizations, and a financial support program). Leonardo explained, "The financial support program is definitely the one that helps me the most. They have great counselors that take their time to explain classes and they give you book stipends to pay for your books since they are very expensive." Leonardo, who is the middle child, mentioned that when he was younger, he witnessed his parents go through the toughest financial circumstances as small business owners. As a child to immigrant parents, Leonardo translated financial documents, helped his parents apply to different loan programs, and ultimately helped his parents receive financial assistance to save the family business. Leonardo mentioned that learning to navigate situations like his parents' financial

burden, made him understand how to use resources within HCC programs to help him transfer to a four-year university. If one program did not offer the resources he needed to transfer, he looked to be a part of another that did. Leonardo's narrative displays a set of skills learned in his upbringing that he was able to apply during his experience navigating the transfer process. With these skills in mind, Leonardo has managed to complete all prerequisite and transferable courses in 2 years and will be transferring to a four-year university in Fall 2020.

Faculty—Cesar's Story. Three participants mentioned that interactions and relationships with faculty impacted their transfer process the most. When asked about his experience with his math professor, Cesar, a first-year student at HCC, stated, "My stats professor was so distant, and he was never around for office hours that I made the decision to drop the class before the deadline." Cesar mentioned that the day after he brought this issue to his counselor and asked for advice. Cesar enrolled in math tutoring, re-enrolled in the class with a different professor, and was currently passing the class with a B. Although dropping the course caused Cesar to wait a semester before retaking it, Cesar mentioned that he did not want to risk receiving a bad grade because he knew that a lower GPA would impact his chances of transferring to his dream university. When I asked him how he knew what steps to take after the situation with his first professor, Cesar mentioned that a faculty member from the previous semester taught him what to do in case he did not feel confident in passing a class. While Cesar encountered a roadblock that caused him to drop the course, the skills and strategies he gained from his interactions with a previous faculty member helped him overcome a challenge that would have affected his goal of maintaining a high GPA. Cesar, ultimately, displays a strong sense of navigational capital that has positive effects on his transfer success.

Discussion

While research indicates that Latinx men leave higher education because of the lack of social capital or their inability to ask for help (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Ramirez, 2008), it is critical to understand how their unique lived experiences motivate them to obtain a college education. The purpose of this study was to show a different narrative through an asset-based approach and understand how different forms of capital influence their transfer success. Results indicate three important outcomes. One, all participants were clear and openly expressed their goal of obtaining a four-year college degree despite facing different challenges. Two, all participants displayed a strong sense of aspirational

and navigational capital that impacted their transfer process. And three, institutional agents and programs played a critical role in their transfer success.

In their aspirational capital, participants, like Diego, allowed themselves to think of their future self in a better position than their present circumstances. According to Yosso (2005), individuals who have dealt with negative educational or non-educational experiences maintain a culture of possibility and aspirations to break the links between their future and their current status. In their navigational capital, participants like Cesar and Leonardo demonstrated perfect examples of how to navigate resources to thrive in stressful situations. According to Yosso, individuals who exemplify a strong sense of navigational capital, do so under specific stressful circumstances. For Cesar, it was navigating different programs that provided different forms of assistance and for Leonardo, it was taking a different approach when retaking the required course—he dropped. An important component highlighted in the study is how all participants relied on institutional agents or programs to assist them in the transfer process. This demonstrates the importance of implementing programs that assist Latinx men in their transfer success and developing positive interactions between Latinx men and institutional agents (Xiong et al., 2016). To examine the disconnect between community colleges and Latinx men, further research should focus on the interactions and perceptions of institutional agents on Latinx men. If this study and current studies indicate that Latinx men aspire to be in college, it is critical to look into how community colleges acknowledge and engage with Latinx men on their campuses.

There were three limitations to this pilot study: sample size, the enrollment status of all participants, and the focus on one community college. Initially, I was to interview six participants however, due to the safety at home guidelines placed during the time of this study, I was unable to recruit the final two participants. The participants were also enrolled full-time at HCC, therefore limiting the participation of part-time students. Lastly, HCC is not representative of all community colleges. All community colleges have different programs that serve students at different capacities.

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