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### Title

Patchwork capital and postsecondary success: Latinx students from high school to college

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5t62719f>

### Journal

Race Ethnicity and Education, 26(6)

### ISSN

1361-3324

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### Publication Date

2023-09-19

### DOI

10.1080/13613324.2020.1798389

Peer reviewed

**Patchwork Capital and Postsecondary Success**

**Latinx Students from High School to College**

**-Pre-Publication Version-**

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Submission to the Race Ethnicity and Education Journal

October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

## **Patchwork Capital and Postsecondary Success**

### **Latinx Students from High School to College**

For Latinx<sup>1</sup> students, college access remains elusive. Latinx high school students aspire to college at rates similar to students of other ethnic and racial backgrounds (Schneider & Saw, 2016). However, Latinx young adults remain underrepresented at four-year universities, and they are considerably less likely than their peers to earn a Bachelor's degree by age 29 (Krogstad 2016). Among Latinx students, those who come from low-income families face multiple marginalizations since social class has also been shown to drive college outcomes (Roksa 2012). Their underrepresentation among college graduates is a concern given the extensive benefits of four-year degrees (Perna 2005).

Central to the discourse on equitable postsecondary outcomes is the question of high school preparation. At schools in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods, the challenge of college readiness is particularly acute. How do academic experiences in high school affect Latinx students' experiences in college? How do students navigate college in spite of inadequate academic preparation and the cultural incongruities they encounter on college campuses? This study aims to understand how the experiences of Latinx students in inner-city high schools shape how they navigate the first year in higher education, and how many succeed in spite of structural disadvantages.

Germane to the conversation of Latinx college success are theories of cultural capital. While numerous theoretical traditions have made meaningful contributions to understanding the college transition, I focus on four strands of theory that highlight college-ready cultural capital

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<sup>1</sup> When describing young men or young women from Latin American descent, I use the terms Latina or Latino depending on their identified gender. I use "Latinx," the gender-neutral term, when referring to all genders.

acquisition for marginalized groups. First, Bourdieu's (1977) *cultural capital* construct – describing how the competencies and dispositions developed in middle- and upper-class homes are rewarded in schools – is associated with college-going outcomes. However, attempts by schools to instill dominant cultural capital in marginalized students may be ineffective. Cipollone and Stich (2017) label these efforts *shadow capital*, largely illusory forms of capital that lack the comprehensiveness and nuance of cultural capital from middle class communities. Alternatively, Yosso (2005) asserts that preoccupations with dominant cultural capital have obscured community assets of students from non-dominant backgrounds. Her theory of *community cultural wealth* rejects deficit framings and describes the ways marginalized cultural resources can be leveraged towards academic success. Unfortunately, educational institutions may be culturally *subtractive schooling*, discouraging cultural knowledge that could enhance outcomes for minoritized youth (Valenzuela 1999).

Despite documented inadequacies of college preparation at urban high schools – from shadow capital to subtractive practices – many inner-city Latinx students excel in college. Existing theories are inadequate to explain their success. If high schools struggle to prepare their Latinx students for college, why do some succeed there? Here, I argue that Latinx students engage in a process of “patchworking” in response to inadequate college preparation, gathering dominant and non-dominant cultural capital from various experiences in and out of schools and applying diverse stores of capital in college.

### **College Readiness and Latinx Students – The Extant Literature**

While academic obstacles for Latinx students are manifold (for summary, see Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015), I focus on three at the intersection of college preparation and the cultural challenges of the college transition: academic readiness, faculty interactions, and, racial

campus climate. First, Latinx students enter college with disparities in “college readiness” measures such as class rank and GPA (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora 2015) due to structural inequities in education. As such they are disproportionately represented in remedial coursework in college (Adelman 2004). Second, reaching out to professors for support is an important way that students can improve their likelihood of postsecondary success, but first-generation students are significantly less likely to engage with campus faculty (Kim & Sax 2009). Indeed, for students with limited exposure dominant cultural capital, reaching out to professors may be daunting (Jack 2014). Third, Latinx students often encounter racially motivated hostility when they arrive at college (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), and Latinx students commonly report microaggressions from their white peers (Ballinas, 2017). The college campus is a minefield of sorts for young Latinx men and women seeking a postsecondary degree.

However, for many Latinx students, educational challenges likely did not begin in college. High schools serving predominantly Latinx populations are under-resourced and inadequately prepare students for postsecondary success (Athanasas, 2018). Urban high schools, often deficit oriented, have profoundly struggled to offer rigorous learning experiences (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Students at urban schools contend with underprepared teachers (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013) and peers who undermine teacher authority (Kitzmiller, 2013). College-going cultures at these schools ineffectively guide students to college preparatory engagement (McDonough 1997; Palardy, 2015). The inculcation of college-ready skills for low-income students runs up against challenges endemic to urban schools.

While the academic obstacles for Latinx students in the secondary and postsecondary arenas are well documented, only a few studies have mapped the processes across the institutional transition. For example, in *Transiciones*, Ruecker (2015) explores the writing

experiences of El Paso high school students, following them into their college writing classrooms. Duncheon (2018) investigates how having acquired community cultural wealth in high school shapes Latinx students' ability to navigate the first-year of college. Thus, while some studies have focused on dominant cultural resources like writing and college knowledge, others have elevated non-dominant cultural assets. To successfully navigate the high school to college transition, however, I argue that students draw on both dominant and non-dominant cultural tools, weaving together patchworks of cultural resources.

In conceptualizing patchwork capital, I lean on research detailing how marginalized students piece together resources towards academic success. Enriquez (2011), for example, researches the scattered social capital of undocumented students. Students can “patchwork” emotional, financial, and informational resources dispersed across their networks. Motivated students thus gather necessary social capital from other social actors. Patchworking cultural capital, which I describe below, may be more difficult since it necessitates the internalization of knowledge and dispositions. For students whose cultures are marginalized, patchworking cultural capital can be a drawn-out process that entails interweaving dominant and non-dominant cultural resources towards college success.

### **Theoretical Framework – A Cultural Patchwork of Resources**

On the one hand, postsecondary success for marginalized students necessitates fluency in dominant cultural repertoires. On the other hand, the expectation that students commit “cultural suicide” (Tierney 1999) to achieve academic success may be counterproductive. As more marginalized students expect to attain postsecondary education, educators need to weigh the benefits of dominant cultural capital and students' own community cultural wealth in preparing them for college.

## **Cultural Capital**

The theory of cultural capital, originally posited by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) contends that social reproduction occurs because the knowledge and dispositions cultivated in upper and middle class homes are rewarded in educational institutions. “By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give” (Bourdieu 1977, 494). These expectations disguise as meritocracy a system of “symbolic violence” designed to maintain social hierarchy. Often, cultural capital has been evaluated in the form of elite (“high-brow”) tastes and interests associated with postsecondary attainment (DiMaggio & Mohr 1985).

However, other scholars have asserted that cognitive and non-cognitive skills associated with college success are also an important form of cultural capital (Lareau & Weininger 2003). Dominant groups seek to inculcate among their children particular skills and dispositions, “and to include in their definition of excellence the practices at which they excel” (Bourdieu, 1996). Skills like reading, writing, and college knowledge, Lareau and Weininger argue, are inseparable from notions of cultural capital, and this capital is formalized by way of academic standards and college entrance exams (Author 2018).

The ability to navigate “elite” environments has also been framed as cultural capital necessary for college success. Jack (2014, 2016) argues that students can develop college-ready cultural capital in high school contexts learning from interactions with peers and teachers fluent in dominant culture. Jack finds that working class students who attended exclusive secondary institutions learned to navigate prestigious social spaces and gained comfort reaching out to adults for academic support. The capacity to interact with members of prestigious institutions is an important component of cultural capital.

Though Bourdieu was primarily focused on class, scholars have more recently mapped the processes by which cultural capital is racialized to deny young people of color access to levers of social advancement. Carter (2005) discusses how the cultural capital valued in U.S. school settings is disconnected from capital valued in non-dominant cultural communities. Race also plays a role in the types of cultural capital brought to bear in parent-teacher interactions (Lareau & Horvat 1999). Texts by White authors and histories from the perspectives of White Americans are elevated, part of a canonical necessity that satisfies “aesthetic dispositions” of dominant cultural taste (Grandjeat, 2006). Racial dynamics are inevitably imposed on processes of cultural capital formation and social reproduction in schools.

Classroom pedagogies attempt to endow marginalized students with White, middle-class cultural capital to enhance their educational prospects. However, Bourdieu was notoriously pessimistic regarding the ability of schools to endow non-dominant students with dominant capital. Cultural capital delivered by way of high school instruction may be a mere “shadow” of skills and dispositions of middle-class homes.

### **Shadow Capital**

According to Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital cannot be simply transferred from one party to another. In his “theory of practice” he emphasized two other elements of the social world that shape how cultural capital is inculcated among young people: field and habitus. Cultural capital is applied to fields – hierarchical arenas of competition where social actors compete over positions and available resources. Capital applicable in one field may be less applicable in another, and a social actor may be more or less fluent in the rules of different fields. Cultural capital does not just need to be obtained, but strategically applied to cultural fields such as schooling, blue collar work, or “the street.” Achieving success in a field necessitates fluency



with the cultural norms and subtle nuances of the field, capacities Bourdieu describes as “habitus” – a set of durable and transposable dispositions developed in homes that is influenced by class background. The middle- and upper-class students who have been immersed in the dominant culture through their upbringings will bring cultural capital to bear with more force and dexterity than their peers from non-dominant backgrounds.

As such, Cipollone and Stich (2017) argue that students who are taught dominant cultural capital at urban schools actually receive “shadow capital,” college readiness skills and dispositions that they believe to be real, but in actuality are only scattered fragments of dominant cultural capital. This happens for two reasons. First, embodied cultural capital necessitates sustained exposure and internalization of cultural ways of being. Gaining facility with academic language or learning how to interact with professors may be skills more dependent on middle class habitus than classroom instruction. Second, schools serving low-income Latinx students, many who are less likely to attain a four-year degree, are less attuned to the needs of college-bound students (McDonough 1997). Thus, urban schools’ college readiness practices are insufficient to offset social disadvantages, working-class habitus, and sparse home access to dominant cultural capital. What marginalized students receive, then, is a mere shadow of the capital developed in middle- and upper-class homes.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

Yosso (2005) argues that discussions of cultural capital of non-dominant youth reinforce deficit framings of their educational potential. Instead, “community cultural wealth” outlines six sources of capital prevalent in marginalized communities that can serve students in achieving educational success. Here, I focus on two: resistance capital that emphasizes how marginalized groups evaluate social injustices and work towards dismantling them; and familial capital that

draws on social ties at school and at home for a sense of connectedness in an unfamiliar space. Community cultural wealth may have implications for college going. Huber (2009) argues via “testimonios” of undocumented Latinx students that community cultural wealth helps them overcome racism at top-tier universities. Multiple studies (Kiyama 2010; Luna & Martinez 2013) document how Latinx students leverage familial support and social networks to maintain their postsecondary aspirations. Building community with critically conscious students can shield them from the harmful impacts racial sleights and facilitate academic success (Huerta & Fishman 2014). Despite the importance of Latinx community cultural wealth in college, the rich cultural assets of Latinx communities may be “subtracted” in high schools.

### **Subtractive Schooling in Urban Contexts**

In an ethnography of a Texas school serving a predominantly Mexican-American population, Valenzuela (1999) argues that schools dilute the cultural assets of their students with curricula and uncaring practices misaligned with community cultural norms. Since home cultures are viewed as “deficits,” rather than assets, schools discourage the cultural repertoires prevalent in their communities. Thus, for marginalized students, community cultural wealth is a strength atrophied by subtractive schooling experiences. As Paris (2012) notes, racially minoritized students

lose their heritage and community ways with language, literacy, and culture in order to achieve in U.S. schools. And this saga of linguistic and cultural loss has had and continues to have devastating effects for the access and achievement of students and communities of color (p. 96).

Students taught to discard the wealth of their communities in high school may continue to do so in college.

**Patchwork Capital**

Thus, existing frameworks are shrouded in pessimism regarding the college transition of racially minoritized youth. Successful college engagement necessitates they develop dominant cultural capital and harness cultural wealth. However, research suggests that urban high schools, though heavily wed to dominant cultural expectations for their students, offer only shadow versions of dominant capital. While students have cultural assets that can be leveraged for academic success, they are undermined by subtractive schooling experience. Existing frameworks suggest for Latinx students scant likelihood of academic success.

Yet, many Latinx students from urban high schools succeed. To understand how, I introduce a theory of patchwork capital. I use “patchwork” as a metaphor for the often-haphazard nature of capital acquisition for college success among marginalized students. Whereas students from the dominant culture seamlessly intertwine parallel capitals from home and school, minoritized youth engage in a more piecemeal process. Marginalized students are not devoid of cultural capital. Shadow capital implies that students are exposed to some dominant cultural capital in their schools. Also, despite subtractive cultural pedagogies, students can discover academic applications for their community cultural wealth. Young Latinx men and women weave together disparate cultural resources into a helter-skelter amalgamation of college resources.

In this paper, I counter the documented scholarly tendency to pit dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth in opposition (Tichavakunda, 2019) and assume the importance both to student success. Given inadequate pre-college educational experiences, assembling a patchwork of capital is challenging. Much like a patchwork quilt, constructing college success necessitates multiple capitals and diverse strategies, some deliberate and others

accidental, which keep students warm amidst “chilly” college transitions. This study assesses how Latinx students from low-income communities weave together a patchwork of capital between high school and college and apply it to postsecondary success.

### **Data and Methods**

I designed a methodology that unravels cultural meanings and ideologies pertinent to the college transition, tracking students from their high schools to college and training a theoretical lens on their movement across these cultural worlds. Twelve Latinx students were selected because they expressed a strong desire to graduate from a four-year university. Through interviews and observations between the senior year of high school and the freshman year of college, I captured their efforts to prepare for college in their home communities and to make a home for themselves in college.

These students were from five different schools in a large California school district and attended a university-based program that met over the summer and during weekends of the students’ senior year. The students received intensive support with applying to college but received little to no guidance for navigating the transition. I attended four of the meetings during the school year to interview students. Interviewees who attended all at least twenty hours of the group’s events between junior-year summer and their senior year of high school were then recruited by email to continue the research through their first year of college. All students who were recruited opted to participate in the research and earned a \$100 gift card for participating.

Most of the participants attended one of the three large comprehensive high schools, but three attended one of two small district schools. The students all had at least a 3.0 Grade Point Average, meaning with respect to grades, all were eligible to apply to all public universities in California. All but one of the students took multiple Advanced Placement courses in high school

– considered to be the most challenging classes at their school. Nearly all of their parents were immigrants, and many reported challenges specific to immigrant communities as educational barriers. Nearly all of the students’ families faced financial struggles – including job losses and exorbitant medical bills. Only one student said they did not receive free or reduced-price lunch. Their families had limited experiences with college. While a handful had siblings that attended community colleges sporadically or dropped out of four-year universities, none said they had a sibling currently at a four-year university. Only one reported close cousins with four-year degrees.

I interviewed students at four points throughout their senior year to understand their high school learning opportunities. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. I interviewed them at three points during their first year of college – once during the summer before school, once during the first half of the schoolyear and once after the schoolyear ended. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. I accompanied students to classes, studied with them for exams, met with their friends, commuted with them to school, and sat in counselor meetings. Each student, except for one, was shadowed for at least ten hours over the course of the year. After data collection, I coded for emergent themes. Initial codes were derived from the theoretical frameworks, but I created subsequent codes as themes emerged from the data (Saldaña, 2015).

An important characteristic of this social context was my presence in it. As a mixed-race person of color with expertise on the high-school-to-college transition, I served in an unofficial mentoring capacity to some of these students. As I tagged along with students around campus, we joked around and they occasionally asked me for guidance about college life and academic decision-making. My advice served two purposes. First, from an ethical standpoint, withholding

potentially supportive information from students would be problematic. A researcher inevitably impacts the research site and is obligated to leave a space better than they found it. Second, through playful interactions, a listening stance, and occasional guidance, I was able to build rapport with students to further my research goals. I offered reminders that I was using their stories for my research, but they trusted that their efforts were being reciprocated. While students leaned on me for occasional direction, my presence in their lives was only sporadic and mostly dwindled away after the conclusion of the school year. Ultimately, their decisions on how to best navigate college were their own. These decisions, I document here.

Nine of the twelve students in this study completed their first year of college with a 3.0 or above and planned to attend their universities in the upcoming school year (see Table 1). Three have been asked to leave their institutions. Given that just over a third of Latinx students graduate from their initial universities (Shapiro, et al., 2019), this is a uniquely successful sample. Next, I document how they achieved their success.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

### **Findings**

Success in the first year necessitated a collection of competencies involving dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth. Unfortunately, none of these students arrived in college with robust access to either of these forms of capital. In what follows, I outline first the ways students encountered dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth between high school and college and assembled them into a patchwork that they applied towards postsecondary success. Then, I discuss three students who were unable to do so.

#### **A Denial of Dominant Cultural Capital from High School to College**

Students questioned the work habits they developed amidst rudimentary high school curricula. They complained of listless pedagogy, whereby teachers displayed apathy about student performance. Most had never written an essay longer than three pages. They felt comfortable putting off most high school work until the day before it was due. Some students complained that teachers focused on completion rather than understanding. According to Stephanie, a student at a mid-tier UC, teachers “just give us work to give us work. They don’t give us work to think on it.” Stella, a Cal State student, feared the shallow intellectual engagement would lead to bad habits in college. “I know I’ve procrastinated a lot in high school. I don’t want to get bit by the procrastination monster.”

Also, students sought academic support infrequently from their teachers, reporting mostly nonexistent or hostile teacher-student relationships. Students across multiple schools described teachers who rebuffed students seeking assistance. In an interview, a student explained, “We ask our teacher and he’s like, ‘Ask your peers,’ but your peers don’t understand either.” Laura complained, “You just have the textbook and Google.” Students reported rarely reaching out to teachers for academic support.

Students thus had reasonable concerns about their ability to navigate college. Most were assigned to remedial math or writing courses, and they struggled to develop learning strategies and meet professor expectations. In classes, I watched students either frantically copy down everything on professors’ slides (which were provided online) or lean back and write down nearly nothing. Many students noticed a change in the amount of thinking required by college curricula. As Daniela explained, “Sometimes high schools are mostly busy work, instead of actually trying to learn and try to make sure that we were actually like synthesizing material and applying it.” The new content, for some students, necessitated new study strategies. “I didn’t

really know what studying was until college,” explained Jane. “I just thought it was you sit down and you go over your notes or something. But it's not like that.”

Writing was a particularly fraught challenge. I sat with Stephanie during finals week as she anguished over an argumentative essay about male contraception. She chose the topic based on Twitter posts she had seen, but had yet to settle on a thesis a day before the due date. After we developed a thesis together based on online research, she got stuck again, unclear of how to organize her paragraphs to support her claim. I asked her why she didn't draw on her experience writing essays in high school, “Because it ain't the same,” she asserted, leaning back from her computer and stretching her arms. Other students had also complained about writing challenges, unaccustomed to the essay lengths and the more open-ended expectations of college writing. Gone were the five-paragraph formats based on a predetermined question on a story they read as a class. Many students struggled to adapt. “I just don't like English,” lamented Jennifer, “because I can't write an essay. I babble on.”

Students struggled to develop systems to manage their workloads and schedules that were far more open than in high school. As Daniela described, “High school, they tell you. They remind you this and this and that. And like they do your schedules for you, but here you're all on your own.” Laura found herself on academic probation at her UC during the first quarter by applying high school work habits in the college setting.

I would do things last minute and I would still get an A ... I thought it would be like that in college, but it hit me in the face. I was like, ‘Oh, shit, like my old games are not going to work here.’

Additionally, some students reported limited guidance from high school staff on how to find support. They had learned that college was an independent endeavor, and would need to rely



only on themselves to achieve academic success. Laura blamed her reluctance to get help in college on her high school teachers.

They even know about college, honestly. They had misconceptions. They thought that a professor is not going to help you – that you're going to be on your own. Yeah, you're going to be on your own if you don't *ask* for help. They don't say that ... they just make college seem like hell.

Learning to seek help was an important component of college success. Unfortunately, many students entered college hesitant to interact with adults who they viewed as significantly different from themselves. Laura described her first time attending office hours. “I was nervous. They just seem really smart ... I think I realized that they are regular people too. Like, they're not on a pedestal. They're just whatever. Just talk to them” Like Laura, most students overcame initial challenges and patchworked competencies related to postsecondary success.

### **Patchworking Dominant Cultural Capital in College**

The students were denied robust access to dominant cultural capital, so many of them sought it out themselves. They assembled pieces of dominant cultural knowledge from assorted resources in their lives. They capitalized on the knowledge of extended family, peers, and teachers to enhance their repertoires of college-going capital.

Lorena had cousins who were in college. Before she started at a CSU, they gave her a gift basket with test booklets and told her to purchase a planner to help her organize her time. Influenced by these messages of preparedness, she described starting papers long before her classmates. “I was done with it two weeks ago ... And people I know did it last night. ... And then they get a bad grade and they wonder why.” Jennifer met a peer in the dorm at her UC who viewed his studies like a “nine-to-five job,” and she adopted this study approach as her own.

Students attended study groups and shared study strategies. Daniela researched “the YouTube community” for useful study strategies and memorization techniques. Stephanie, extraordinarily shy, was only able to start visiting office hours when she had friends who were willing to accompany her. When coming across peers who effectively navigated the challenges of college, students often weaved these strategies into their patchworks of dominant cultural capital.

Some high school teachers were also recalled as purveyors of dominant cultural wisdom. Jennifer, drew on lessons from a biology teacher who also taught at a local college to inform her college study habits. Teresa, meanwhile, believed that having gone to a small high school with strong teacher-student relationships enhanced her capacity to seek help in college. “Every teacher had that group of kids who like hung out with them during the break.” In college, she explained, “you will be like ‘Oh hey, that teacher acts like this high school teacher, maybe they will be okay with me asking them this.’” Students reported that teachers who could broaden stores of college-ready capital were rare but provided useful guidance for the college transition.

### **A Subtraction of Community Cultural Wealth from High School to College**

Students reported a number of high school experiences subtractive of their community cultural wealth. First, students reported few opportunities to engage with pedagogies that elevated Latinx cultures or community resistance to oppression. Most students shared that more than 90% of their curricula emphasized the histories and literatures of white America. Jane explained, “This whole school system is just for us to learn that US history and how it’s come to be, but we don’t learn about our own culture or background.” Jennifer wondered if there were any Latinx authors worth studying. “Maybe there’s not good authors that write Spanish books,” she conjectured. In class, they struggled to see themselves in the canon. “You can’t relate to Shakespeare,” Laura explained. “It’s like years ago. You can barely understand what he’s saying.

I mean I get it. It's art. It should be appreciated and learned about, but I don't know how we can relate to it now." Students accepted that schooling was on dominant cultural terms. "It is what it is," lamented Stephanie.

Also, students reported that familial capital was underutilized in high school. Possibly due to limited college guidance resources, students' families were uninformed about their college application processes. Daniela's parents for example, only learned about college from a family her mother babysat for, whom she referred to as "90210" people. Families, though a potential source of inspiration and support, were largely disconnected from learning processes.

Students who went away for college questioned whether their identities were compatible with their new environment. While students who attended schools in the local CSU system, felt very comfortable amongst the student body of their university – the ethnic makeup of their new schools largely mirrored that of their high school – for those at UCs, the diversity of their campus was new and somewhat uncomfortable. Laura described,

In high school there are more people that you can relate to. In college, everybody's different. You don't realize how different you are until college. Like oh shoot, these people are not like me.

While students reported no overt racial hostility in their new surroundings, and none reported racial microraggressions during their first semesters, many believed that they were at a disadvantage because of their backgrounds. Jane noted, "It's definitely tougher for Latinos in comparison to like Americans that were already born into like, 'Oh, your parents go to college so you're obviously going to go' ... They're like laid back. They're like, 'Oh I got this.'" This sentiment contributed to a sense of academic anxiety. Jennifer explained,

I feel like I see a white person, I'm like damn, sometimes I feel lower than her because she looks like she's smarter. ... I'm like damn, they probably live in some big ass house and stuff like that ... I just doubt myself a little bit.

Being at colleges with few Latinx peers reinforced deficit orientations learned from subtractive schooling experiences wherein home cultures were viewed as deficiencies that threatened educational success.

Universities offered a wider array of culturally aligned opportunities than students had in high school. However, most did not initially express an awareness or interest in these opportunities, and some students reported explicit reluctance to engage questions of race and ethnicity. Stella, for example, was enrolled in a required course at her CSU that addressed race and racism. She expressed irritation at the material. "It's like so boring," she explained. Digging deeper, Stella suggested that her reluctance was shaped by former teachers and family members. Her brother, who she lived with, openly derided the content. "He was like, 'Those classes just tell you how this and that is racist. And racism doesn't exist' ... He was always telling me how dumb it was." Stella also discussed the class with an old history teacher who warned that they "feed you a lot of bullshit in college." These conversations made Stella skeptical of the content. "They are older, so they know like a lot more than I do," she reasoned. Similarly, Laura, dismissed the notion of taking a Chicano studies class during her first quarter because her mom warned her that MEChA would try to recruit her. She did not want to think about racism: "It makes you angry again, and I don't want to go through that, because that's in the past." Messages in high schools and communities about the insignificance of racism colored students' college decisions.

### **Patchworking Community Cultural Wealth in College**

Amidst cultural isolation and anxiety, students reconfigured communal kinship networks, finding a “home away from home.” Family-like connections, so prevalent in home communities, were quickly recreated for most students. Jane developed a robust friendship network through her Educational Opportunity Program, and was almost perpetually surrounded by a tight-knit group of Latinx peers. Teresa joined a pre-law organization wherein a significant majority of the members were young women of color. Daniela shared a dorm room with two friends from high school whom she leaned on early in the year when she felt significant homesickness.

Students also sought representations of themselves in their curricular engagements. Some stumbled upon culturally affirming learning opportunities through their campus activities. Even Laura, initially skeptical of modern-day racism because of her mom’s MEChA warnings stumbled on an ethnic studies class due to a diversity requirement. She said she loved it and earned an A. After, having changed her mind about studying race, she described racism as “more hidden” and “tricky.” She noticed microaggressions – subtle sleights associated with one’s racial or ethnic background – and described a racist social media page featuring members of her school community disparaging immigrants. Other students, who were not necessarily hostile to coursework on race and ethnicity, came across opportunities that emphasized cultural connections. Jennifer discovered Latinx authors in college. A counselor recommended that Pearl sign up for Chicano Studies, which became her favorite course. A friend of Jane convinced her to join a *baile folklórico* group that taught Mexican regional dances. “Finding that little piece of home,” Jane said, helped her feel connected to a campus so far from her community. For nearly all of these students, college was the first time they found substantive opportunities to apply cultural wealth in an academic setting. Introduced to culturally aligned educational opportunities, they dove in.

While most students discovered opportunities for cultural engagement for the first time in college, Daniela drew upon resistance-oriented experiences from high school to guide her towards culturally affirming curricula. Daniela was a regular participant in a community organization in high school that advocated for racial and socioeconomic justice. In her university coursework, she wrote papers about Dolores Huerta and Latinx representation in the media. She believed her experiences with the organization “really helped me overall in my success even getting to college and knowing what I'm passionate about.” Students applied culturally relevant knowledge towards academic success, engaging in curricula that stimulated intellectual energies.

### **Incomplete Patchworks of Capital**

Most of the students were able to piece together enough capital from various sources to assemble a pleasantly successful first-year college experience. However, three – Miguel, Jonathan, and Erica – were unable to remain at their universities. The circumstances that led to their removals were distinct, but each struggled to collect the types of capital that their more successful peers adeptly assembled in their first year of college.

**Erica.** “I would have succeeded in school if I hadn't had my manic episode,” Erica told me the summer after her first year of college would have ended. Erica's exit from school was jolting. She explained that she “lost her mind twice” during the first semester. She never experienced such a severe mental crisis before. After withdrawing from the first semester and neglecting to enroll in the second, Erica was told she could not return to her university.

I expected Erica would experience significant success in college due to substantial stores of familial and resistance capital. She was deeply involved in community organizations and saw clear connections between her academics and social justice. “The only way this justice is

achievable is if I get my education,” she said in high school. However, after a promising start to college, Erica experienced profound emotional trauma. She found her college was unsupportive during her manic episode despite well-publicized rhetoric around mental health. Erica was unable to navigate the bureaucracy to secure medical leave. While ultimately, she found a dean that tried to help, his support was not enough, and Erica was removed from the school.

Erica noted that her academic talents might have been obscured by limited access to the capital of wealthier communities. “I feel like if I were trained from birth to do something or given access to all these different opportunities, I would be unstoppable,” she said. Whether a more privileged upbringing would have enabled Erica to figure out university systems during her manic episode is unclear, but Erica expressed that she was denied the bureaucratic knowledge and support to succeed in college.

**Miguel.** I set up my first meeting in the third week of classes with Miguel on his UC campus at 7:45, just before his 8 AM math class. By eight, Miguel had not arrived. I texted and called his phone multiple times. At 8:30, he finally answered with a groggy morning greeting. He had slept through the start of class. Given his struggles balancing work and school, Miguel was unsurprised he overslept.

That's a recurring issue that I've been having – staying up all night. I went Thursday and Friday night without sleeping, the whole night. Saturday, I went to 4 AM and knocked out for a bit and then I went to go work right after ... So it's been kind of hard on me. Miguel planned to major in Computer Science, and immediately enrolled in his major course work during the first quarter. His academic disadvantages became readily apparent. Most of the material was foreign to him. “That's something totally new ... I thought I was going to be like

learning how to code in Java or Python or something, but nope, we're going to take you down to the basics ... zeros and ones and from there to the assembly line.” In an early assignment, Miguel designed code that was much simpler than that of his classmates. While his code had three components, another student’s had 32 – code that his professor said would be used “on a spaceship or something.” In part, Miguel attributed his disadvantages to the lack of rigorous science preparation in high school. “Like my AP Physics test ... I remember our teacher cut the material off that we didn't learn. It was on the exam. I feel like it kind of like hurt us in a way.”

Miguel made a friend in his computer class who he solicited for support. The friend was a white male with substantial coding experience in and out of his suburban high school. The friend sent Miguel notes from the class Miguel missed and helped him with homework. While Miguel envisioned a symbiotic academic relationship between the two budding computer engineers, their interactions were mostly one-sided. Given the knowledge gaps between them, Miguel believed he had little to offer. “He's just on top of everything,” explained Miguel. “But I appreciate his friendship and the help that he's bringing along.” Despite the support, Miguel eventually drifted from his friend and failed computer science and math the first quarter.

His feelings of inefficacy in class, however, were offset by his confidence at his job. Miguel worked at a local restaurant that bore a striking resemblance to a summer job he had in high school. “Easiest job I ever got,” he explained. “My manager did a couple calls for me and I had a job like ASAP.” At work, Miguel was surrounded by other Latinx young adults. He described working nearly thirty hours a week and excelling so much that his boss promised him promotions. Miguel bragged that he made 25 cents more per hour than his peers with campus jobs. The bus trip to the job was almost an hour. The work hours and commute exhausted him, but Miguel was hesitant to take out more loans to pay for school.



Miguel was contributing to his family who was struggling financially due to an injury his father endured at work. He told me not to worry about it ... But I don't want it to be like him by himself ... because at that time when he got hurt, he was the only guy working in the house.” Miguel also felt a sense of obligation to his younger sisters. “I need to do that is that my sisters have a better chance that I am right now. They are both doing good in school, way better than me.” Miguel wanted to make sure his sisters had a laptop and school supplies. Over his parents’ objections, Miguel said he sent approximately \$600 from his paycheck every two weeks.

In addition to a hectic work schedule, Miguel had a robust friend group and two romantic relationships during his first year. Nearly all of his closest friends were Latinx and from the same neighborhood as him. “The little experiences that we share, that we create, it kind of reminds me of my home.” No friends in this group, however, were computer engineering majors, and he rarely leaned on them for academic support. Also, his work schedule made attending study sessions challenging, and he struggled to find support from professors or teaching assistants.

Miguel’s most successful academic experience came during his last quarter before his removal from the school. In a Latin American Studies class, Miguel learned about how “the US was intervening with all these politics ... I was just like, ‘Wow I never thought the US had such a big impact on these countries ... and they're suffering from poverty, violence.’” Miguel regrets not taking the class earlier, and says doing so would have eased his college transition. He never considered a Latin American history course because he knew so little about the topic. “[In high school] we don't go beyond our borders pretty much. The only class that I took that was beyond the US was world history. There’s no classes like Latino studies or Chicano studies or stuff like that.” In the course, Miguel “actually kind of got close to the professor” and connected the content to his family history. He spoke about the class with his dad. He earned a B. The

promising academic experience, however, could not keep Miguel in school. He failed economics that quarter and was removed from the university.

**Jonathan.** Like Miguel, Jonathan used experience from a summer job to secure a similar job during his first quarter of college. Jonathan worked twenty hours a week at a Jack-in-the-Box, often closing down the restaurant at two in the morning and spending a portion of his income on an Uber back to his dorm. He sought material comforts and financial independence. He declined his parents' money and spoke of "debts" for their support in his transition to college. Jonathan paid for all of his food, and even after running out of dining hall dollars at the end of the year, resisted reaching out to his parent for help. Financial independence for Jonathan meant being able to meet not just basic needs, but also to afford minor indulgences. "Once you see the money come in," he explained, "then your just like okay, working is not that bad. ... I want like a TV or something like that." Jonathan described going shopping with friends, perusing the merchandise: "'Oh this would look nice in my room!' – then I end up buying it." In the second quarter, he bought a PlayStation 4, a game console that his stepdad owned but Jonathan was not allowed to use.

Jonathan suggested that his sense of belonging was impacted by the relative ease with which he saw peers transitioning to college. He was readily aware of socioeconomic disparities. "You see students coming with their BMWs or coming with the best gadgets and you feel like you don't belong here. You want the life that they have, but you just can't have it."

Academically, Jonathan also felt at a disadvantage. "So many white students here; so many Asian students here and they understand what they are learning ... And I'm just like, 'Do I really belong?'"

Jonathan adopted a freewheeling approach to college studying that tended towards personal enjoyment over academic preparation. In high school, Jonathan maintained a rigid schedule. He filled his day with leadership activities, and at home, his parents ensured he did homework and went to sleep early. “In high school ...they basically fed you,” he explained. “Over here, the food is there on the table, but as soon as you try to grab it, they pull away the food.” Without structure, Jonathan adopted a looser approach to his studies. He reported watching five hours of TV a day during his first quarter. He did not attend office hours during despite struggling with homework and exams. “We have so much freedom to get lazy,” he explained. Jonathan’s commitment to freedom – personally and financially – undermined his academic aspirations.

### **Discussion**

These findings contribute to the ongoing conversation on the role of cultural capital in educational attainment for marginalized groups. For these students, dominant cultural capital was denied, and their community cultural wealth as subtracted. “Shadow capital” is an apt metaphor. The capital offered by schools provides only hazy silhouettes of college readiness. I argue that through patchwork capital, students color in these shadowy figures, drawing on a palette of dominant and non-dominant cultural resources. The data lead me to three points about this process. First, inadequate high school resources necessitated a piecemeal approach. Second, dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth were overlaid towards a patchwork of capital for college success. Third, patchwork capital is precarious. Its assembly is complex and involves much uncertainty, and the students endure marginalizations that threaten to unravel their tenuous composition. That some students succeed in the cultural transition between urban

communities and postsecondary settings necessitates a theory capable of understanding that success. In this data, patchwork capital emerges as a potential lens through which to do so.

### **Piecing Together College-Ready Capital from Inadequate High School Preparation**

Despite well-documented challenges of Latinx achievement in college (Shapiro, et al., 2019), the vast majority of these students succeeded. They found success in spite of inadequate college preparation. Their high school courses failed to help them develop academic skill. They had minimal experience with academic independence. They had little practice reaching out for support and were told by teachers that asking for help was futile. Also, high schools were reportedly ineffective at teaching students to harness their community cultural wealth towards academic success. That so many of these students excelled is a testament to their efforts at assembling a patchwork of college-ready capital.

First, these students gathered dominant cultural capital from various experiences between high school and college. Some students recalled a particular high school class that readied them for the college environment. Others drew on relationships with high school teachers to navigate interactions with college faculty. Some developed study strategies based on advice from friends or family members. Even YouTube was a purveyor of college-ready capital. The students' sparse exposure to dominant cultural resources necessitated a patchwork approach that drew from a variety of conveniently positioned sources of college-ready assets.

Also, most students found scattered pockets of community cultural wealth in the college environment. Again, their stilted awareness of their community wealth from subtractive schooling experiences forced a patchwork approach. Some students were directed to cultural experiences from a friend. Others stumbled upon culturally affirming opportunities by way of academic counselors or university requirements. Only Daniela drew on pre-college experiences

to pursue community cultural wealth in college. Many students sought family-like connections with peers and leveraged those networks for academic success. Community cultural wealth provided patchwork shelter in the unfamiliar terrain of the university environment.

Learning to leverage dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth towards college success took time. Stephanie and Laura were at first fearful of talking to professors, but ultimately teamed up with friends to attend office hours and learned they were “regular people too.” Jennifer, who struggled to focus early in the year, learned of a “nine-to-five” strategy from one of her peers. With respect to community cultural wealth, students were initially reluctant to apply “that little piece of home” to their college success, learning from teachers and family members that community resistance efforts were misguided. However, many quickly latched on to opportunities that harnessed their familial and resistance capital such as courses on race and equity or student groups with other students of color. Over time, capital was haphazardly gathered and guided students through their first year of college.

### **Weaving an Assorted Patchwork**

Overwhelmingly, students drew upon both dominant and non-dominant sources of capital to achieve first-year college success, and often these capitals would intersect. Theories of dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth are often portrayed as conflicting (Tichavakunda, 2019), but perhaps they are best seen in concert. Students developed sophisticated study habits between *baile* practices or hanging out with Latinx friends. Older family provided useful college advice. Helpful counselors directed them to critically conscious learning opportunities. Since students lacked abundant stores of either, combined repertoires of both forms of capital allowed students to assemble a robust patchwork towards academic success.

Erica's story of psychological trauma represents the challenges of overcoming crisis situations without multifaceted patchwork. As a senior in high school, Erica expressed the most advanced ability of any of these students to draw on the wealth of her community towards academic success. In college, however, Erica simply could not navigate the complex bureaucracy of university enrollment regulations to save her spot on campus amidst a severe psychological episode. Navigating complex systems of higher education necessitates dominant cultural capital and professional guidance, two things of which Erica was largely deprived.

### **The Precariousness of Patchwork Capital**

Patchworks of capital, by nature, are tattered and tenuous. They are piecemeal, assembled by way of less-than-ideal resources from inadequate and subtractive schooling experiences. While students had some exposure to dominant cultural capital, the class habitus of these students rendered these strategies unnatural. Succeeding in college necessitated rapid adaptations to a novel environment that traversed multiple Bourdieusian "fields of practice." While in some fields, students felt comfortable and naturally at home – in friend groups, jobs, or cultural activities – in classrooms or administrative offices, students were more at sea. They struggled to learn the rules of the field of postsecondary education and were occasionally unsure how to marshal their community cultural wealth to help them succeed. Piecing together resources from insufficient stores of capital led some students to make troublesome academic choices.

Additionally, hardships tugged at the frayed seams of haphazardly sewn patchworks. Students from marginalized backgrounds are under unique duress. In the face of stress and trauma, patchwork capital is worn, often to the point of disrepair. For Latinx students from inner-city schools, the fragile nature of patchwork capital is a product of the complexity of its assembly and the often-harrowing social circumstances in which it must be put to use.

While Erica, Miguel and Jonathan were not devoid of capital, assembling an academically useful patchwork was challenging, and they made some mistakes. Erica was unprepared to figure out how to take medical leave. Jonathan, was sociable and a leader in high school, and sought to fit in with his wealthier peers. In a way, he adopted dominant cultural ideologies, work hard and spend money in a fashion similar to his peers. But his work hours and social outings impeded his studies. Miguel, in spite of my advice, steadfastly refused to take on more student loans and worked far away from campus for almost thirty hours a week. He felt “at home” at work and in his social circle, leveraging stores of familial capital. Unfortunately, neither of these endeavors supported him with his computer science assignments. Often, these students made justifiable decisions that could enhance their quality of life and allow them to fit in with their peers, but their choices came at the cost of academic opportunities. These students had some dominant capital and community cultural wealth, but these resources were often misapplied to their academic circumstances.

The assembled patchwork of capital was made more tenuous by social trauma and marginalization. Erica’s mental breakdown hurled her into a complex bureaucracy. Miguel may not have worked so many hours if his dad had never been injured. Jonathan’s anxiety about fitting in with his friends was made more challenging by his working class background. The students faced profound stressors that stretched the limits of their patchworks of capital. While Erica, Jonathan and Miguel are committed to earning their way back into their respective colleges, their futures are uncertain. Through the lens of patchwork capital, the question of their academic success rests on whether they can find and appropriately apply cultural resources that have been obscured amidst personal histories in inner city schools and communities.

### **Conclusion**

Patchwork capital is an innovation of necessity – a resourceful adaptation to an unfamiliar environment. Latinx students’ patchwork approaches, while often successful, lack the seamless character of the college transitions of their privileged peers. Importantly, however, the cases presented here are hopeful, and they can inform how schools might improve. As many scholars have suggested, schools may have the capacity to enhance dominant cultural capital (Jack, 2016) and community cultural wealth (Ochoa, 2007) towards academic success. In so doing, stubborn attainment inequities may be attenuated. Educators might consider ways to broaden stores of dominant capital applicable to college outcomes. Help-seeking, study skills, and time management can enhance students’ likelihood of postsecondary success. Teachers might also encourage students to harness community cultural wealth. By making explicit the connections between non-dominant cultural capital and achievement, students may be more apt to apply cultural strengths to college success. The success of Latinx students who aspire to a successful first year of college may necessitate determined efforts to enhance their capacity to construct a productive patchwork of dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth in university settings.



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