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Social & Cultural Capital Influence on First-Generation Latina/o/x Students' College Choice

By

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DISSERTATION

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in

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in the

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2023

## **ABSTRACT**

First-generation Latina/o/x students have some of the lowest college attainment rates in the nation. College attainment is influenced by the access students have to different college systems. The college choices students access can reflect individual, community, and school-level factors that impact how much college knowledge and resources students use to support their college-going efforts. First-generation Latina/o/x students attending well-resourced high schools are perceived to have access to high levels of social and cultural capital that can aid their college-going efforts. However, there is disproportionate access to college-going resources among first-generation Latina/o/x students attending well-resourced high schools with greater socioeconomic diversity. This qualitative study relies on student interviews with first-generation Latina/o/x students to first explore how students attending well-resourced high schools access social and cultural capital in their school settings compared to their community settings. Secondly, it identifies how students access capital and resources that influence their college choice process. The experiences of the student participants revealed the multi-layered navigation students face daily at school, at home with family, and individually as they make a college choice. The study demonstrates how individual college guidance, mentorship, and familial involvement are some of the potential strategies brought forth by school and community partnerships that can support college-going efforts and in turn, college attainment rates among first-generation Latina/o/x students.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my parents, José and Martha Ortiz, and to the parents of the students I've had the privilege of working with over the years at Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula (BGCP) who share similar stories of strength, persistence, and hope.

To my parents, and those of my students, I share the following dedicatory message: thank you for envisioning generational success and taking the bold steps to pursue it. The discomfort you felt arriving in a new country is far greater than the discomfort we have felt in our classrooms. The strength and hard work you've modeled constantly fuels the motivation behind our hard work and persistence. The hopes you had for us, have become the goals we've sought to reach. Not only did you have the courage to leave everything you knew, but your persistence allowed for us to have options. You gave us the privilege of choice.

*Me gustaría dedicar esto a mis padres, José y Martha Ortiz, y a los padres de los estudiantes con los que he tenido el privilegio de trabajar a lo largo de los años en Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula (BGCP) que comparten historias similares de fuerza, perseverancia y esperanza.*

*A mis padres y a los de mis alumnos, comparto el siguiente mensaje dedicatorio: gracias por imaginar el éxito generacional y dar los pasos necesarios para perseguirlo. La incomodidad que sintieron al llegar a un nuevo país es mucho mayor que la incomodidad que hemos sentido en nuestras clases. La fuerza y el trabajo duro que han modelado alimentan constantemente la motivación detrás de nuestro trabajo duro y persistencia. Las esperanzas que tenían para nosotros se han convertido en las metas que hemos buscado alcanzar. No solo tuvieron la valentía de dejar todo lo que conocían, sino que su persistencia nos permitió tener opciones. Nos dieron el privilegio de elegir.*

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

In 2016, 36.2% of California's population was Latina/o/x, making it the second state after New Mexico, to hold the largest percentage of the Latina/o/x population in the U.S. (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Yet, California has one of the lowest college degree attainment rates among the Latina/o/x population at 18.3% compared to other high Latina/o/x population states (e.g. 19.7 % in Texas and 26.6% in New York (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Nationally, Latina/o/x adults have the lowest college attainment rates compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Latina/o/x adults are less likely to hold a college degree than their white counterparts, and this disparity continues to grow with over 60% of Latina/o/x adults having only a high school diploma or less, compared to 28% of white women and 35% of white men (Anthony, 2021). While college enrollment levels rose in 2000, the college degree attainment gap between Latina/o/x and white adults has widened. Latina/o/x adults hold fewer than 50% of the college degrees than their white counterparts, and Latina/o/x's college degrees are less likely to be bachelor's and graduate degrees (Anthony, 2021). These lower levels of college attainment can be attributed to various societal and financial factors that Covid-19 most recently exacerbated and have threatened college enrollment levels across different types of higher education institutions.

Where students enroll significantly affects their ability to complete a college degree. Since 2016, 90% of undergraduate Latina/o/x students in California attend a public college or university 72% enroll in a California Community College, 13% enroll in a California State University (CSU), and 4% enroll in a University of California (UC) (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Even with increases in Latina/o/x students enrolling in higher education, enrollment levels are not proportionate to California's Latina/o/x college-age population. The

enrollment levels across the various public and private higher education institutions in California are well under 47%, the percentage of California's Latina/o/x college-age population (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Latina/o/x students remain underrepresented across public four-year colleges and universities, especially the UC system, which yields higher degree completion rates. With a significantly higher percentage of enrollment at California Community Colleges, Latina/o/x students must be able to navigate a complex pathway to transfer to a four-year institution, which only 2% can do within a two-year mark and 13% in three to four years (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Low transfer rates and enrollment levels at four-year institutions reflect the complex systems that create barriers for Latina/o/x students to access and complete higher education—especially for a predominately first-generation student population.

Several individual and school-level factors collectively affect college enrollment, including knowledge of different systems, affordability, and access to cultural and social capital (Perna, 2006). As 75% of Latina/o/x first-year students are first-generation, many of their parents may not be able to provide the necessary information to consider different college options (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Financial needs can further affect students' ability to enroll in college full-time while seeking employment to offset college costs. Higher enrollment at community colleges, for example, is often a reflection of its affordability and its accessibility as it may be the only option due to eligibility requirements that other higher education institutions require (Kurlaender, 2006). Nonetheless, high schools and communities can impact first-generation students' college knowledge and resources that influence students' college decision behaviors (Kurlaender, 2019). School and community contexts thus play a significant role in the preparation and eligibility requirements students complete since college eligibility coursework depends on a school's resources.

College eligibility and academic competitiveness can lead to greater access to college options; however, high schools must provide equitable opportunities to access coursework and resources. Unfortunately, disproportionate access to these resources persists even within the most resourced settings. In well-resourced districts that offer a wide range of advanced coursework and have a diverse demographic of students enrolled, the A-G course completion rates by race and ethnicity are higher for white students than Latina/o/x students (California Department of Education, 2020). These districts create complex environments for lower-income Latina/o/x students to navigate. In 2020, over 60% of the most expensive zip codes throughout the U.S. were located in California (Borden, 2020). Several of these areas neighbor lower-income communities where there is a larger Latina/o/x population residing. East Palo Alto, for example, has a median household income of \$60,600 - \$97,000 with over 50% of its population being Latina/o/x compared to its border cities of Palo Alto and Atherton, where the median household income is closer to \$250,000 (Data USA, 2018; PolicyLink, 2020). Though students attending these well-resourced public high schools may be assumed to have access to social and cultural capital due to their proximity to various higher education institutions (Hillman & Boland, 2018), however, they may be less likely to access social and cultural capital through their high school (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Yet, much of the existing literature on college choice for first-generation Latina/o/x students has focused on rural or urban environments where high schools are often under-resourced, and the student body is more homogenous in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) (Athanasios et al., 2016; Perez & McDonough, 2008). While much of this literature has looked at school context and institutional agents who provide social capital and the cultural knowledge to navigate the college choice process in formal ways through college counseling or

college workshops, there is less literature on the formal and informal ways students access capital to gain the cultural knowledge and resources to navigate the college process. There is an opportunity to expand on the existing literature about Latina/o/x students' college choice by understanding how those in environments with greater socioeconomic diversity and substantial academic resources in high school and their communities access social and cultural capital in school and their communities to navigate college choice.

### **Research Questions**

This study focuses on exploring the college choice process for first-generation, Latina/o/x students who attend public high schools in one of the most expensive areas to live in California. The study seeks to understand how students develop social and cultural capital in formal and informal ways at their schools and in their communities that influence their college choice.

The following research questions guide this study:

- How do first-generation Latina/o/x students who attend well-resourced public high schools access social and cultural capital through their school and community settings?
- In what ways does the social and cultural capital they access through school and community settings influence their college choice process?

With an evolving higher education landscape, a changing economy, and a growing Latina/o/x population in California, increasing the number of first-generation Latina/o/x students seeking postsecondary education is essential to meet future employment demands expected to require college degrees in 2050 (Acevedo, 2017; Schak & Nichols, 2017). Understanding how first-generation Latina/o/x students develop social and cultural capital to access higher education can shape the policies and practices that high schools and higher education institutions adopt to increase college attainment rates for the Latina/o/x population in California. The opportunities

and resources that students leverage can also inform the kinds of strategic partnerships that can fill gaps currently present in our public school system to support college-going efforts among first-generation Latina/o/x students.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

Most first-generation Latina/o/x students are at a greater disadvantage for enrolling in college without the proper college counseling, information, and network resources compared to other underrepresented students and their white peers (Lee et al., 2017). Many first-generation Latina/o/x students have a unique college choice process that deviates from the more traditional linear models illustrating a student's college pathway. How first-generation Latina/o/x students build a college-going identity and exhibit college-going behaviors may influence their college choice. The following section discusses the traditional college choice frameworks and the Latina/o/x college choice process and how these influence students' underlying beliefs and values that shape their college-going identity and college access.

#### **Traditional Choice Frameworks**

While traditional frameworks aim to capture the college choice process, they are not always fitting for Latinx/a/o students. For example, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) traditional three-stage college choice model illustrates a linear process students experience when pursuing higher education. It starts with students' dispositions about college, what they believe and what motivates them to pursue college. As they explore and search for different college options, they actively gather information to decide whether to pursue college and where to do so. This traditional model assumes students have the necessary capital to gather information and make an informed decision on how they value college, prepare to apply, and ultimately choose a college (Cox, 2016). While Hossler and Gallagher (1987) aim to capture the college choice process, their model is not always accurate for first-generation Latina/o/x students. This linear model does not consider the impact of complex environments, socio-economic factors, and Latina/o/x students'

habitus that influences their dispositions, search process, and college choice behavior (Holland, 2020). To more fully understand the college choice of different groups, conceptual and theoretical frameworks require diverse disciplinary approaches (Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006). Perna's (2006) college choice model offers a more holistic consideration of factors that differentiate college choice outcomes for different students. The model illustrates four-layered contexts: social, economic and policy, higher education, school and community, and habitus that impact how different students navigate a complex process. Grounded in human capital theory, Perna's (2006) college choice model assumes students pursue higher education for the long-term benefits associated with social mobility that outweigh the costs of investing heavily in the short-term, while also accounting for the sociological-cultural influences on college choice, such as social and cultural capital. By integrating sociological-cultural factors, Perna's (2006) model is more comprehensive than traditional human capital approaches because it accounts for the differences between groups who may have varying levels of information regarding the costs and benefits of pursuing college and, therefore, varying college choice behaviors.

The model assumes four contextual layers influence a student's college choice decision. In its fourth layer, Perna considers the larger social, economic, and policy contexts. This includes economic conditions, public policies, and demographic changes that influence college choice broadly and across each of the other nested layers. The third layer focused on higher education's marketing, recruitment, and institutional characteristics that shape different institutions' enrollment strategies. In turn, this third layer affects how students receive information about the college and its admission and selection criteria, influencing their college choice decisions. Both layers thus capture characteristics that influence the remaining layers in the model.

The second layer in Perna's (2006) model recognizes schools' and communities' roles in shaping student college choice. Schools can provide the resources students need, such as college counseling, rigorous course offerings, gifted programs, and access to additional services that support college-going behaviors and shape college choice (Gonzalez et al, 2003). Similarly, a student's community outside of school may be better positioned to support students in these ways when their schools lack the necessary resources or systems to access these resources. As such, the school and community contexts encompass the ways social structures inside and outside of school support or detract from students' college choice.

As the model narrows in on the individual, the first layer focuses on a student's habitus, defined by the common perceptions, expectations, and aspirations a student has about college. A student's habitus is shaped by their demographic characteristics, social and cultural capital, and underlying beliefs they form because of their environments that influence what they believe to be possible and what is likely to be possible based on social position. Cultural capital refers to the cultural knowledge derived primarily from parents that often defines social status, while social capital refers to the social networks and ways social connections are cultivated (Bourdieu, 1986; Morrow, 1999; Perna, 2006). Students who have greater access to cultural capital, have more exposure and resources that promote college, especially college-educated parents who understand, value and promote college-going behaviors (McDonough, 1997). This kind of parent engagement is also a form of social capital because parents may promote connections with their children, across school agents, and among their networks (Coleman, 1988, Perna 2006). School agents like counselors, further transmit social and cultural capital by speaking about college and advising students. Peers may also be a form of social capital when they promote college-going behaviors and may be especially effective for low SES students as they engage in school



(Gonzalez et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997). While Perna's (2006) college choice model captures the multilayered factors that influence a student's college choice and recognizes that college choice varies across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, it does not necessarily center the choice process among first-generation Latina/o/x students due to their intersectional identities.

### **Latina/o/x College Choice**

Building on Perna's (2006) college choice model, Acevedo-Gil (2017) offers *college-conocimiento*. This framework demonstrates how Latina/o/x students navigate between complex layers and often experience a nonlinear and nonsequential college choice process. *College-conocimiento* describes seven stages that a Latina/o/x student may encounter in pursuing higher education (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). While the seven stages describe a student's search, planning, decision-making, and college selection like other models, *college-conocimiento* includes different stages that center Latina/o/x students' experiences.

The first stage *El Arrebato*, occurs when a student experiences an impactful event that motivates them to actively pursue college because they recognize the benefits of a college education. This stage can be influenced by a student's habitus, school, and community context as captured in the first two layers in Perna's (2006) model. The second stage, *Nepantla*, moves the student to search for college information after deciding to pursue college. The quality or depth of the knowledge they gain is dependent on their habitus, school and community resources, and location, as outlined in the first three layers in Perna's (2006) model. In the third stage, *Coatlicue*, students anticipate the obstacles they may encounter in their pursuit of and while in college, possibly creating a nonlinear pathway if a student changes their mind about their ability to be admitted and to go to college. In determining their options, they may enter the fifth stage of *El Compromiso*, where they continue their pursuit to go to college because they associate their

college plans with a higher purpose and recognize that applying to college may be in service of and for their family and community. Informed by the first and second layers in Perna's (2006) model, students' greater purpose may be defined by their individual habitus and their community context.

After applying to colleges, students move into the fifth stage, *Coyolxauhqui*, to choose a college and embrace a new college-going identity. This stage can move students back to the second stage as they continue gathering college information and choose a postsecondary pathway that will fit their needs. Latina/o/x students with lower SES may need to reconsider options to account for financial feasibility (Kim & Nuñez, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2015). Kurlaender (2006) found that Latina/o/x students of both lower and higher SES backgrounds were more likely to enroll in community college compared to other ethnic groups. Students' college aspirations or dispositions may also change if discouraged by college costs or lack of financial resources to pursue college options. This process can move students into the sixth stage, where they face a clash of realities. As students accept colleges and deepen their college-going identity, they may change their course after conflicting factors move them to earlier stages. Latina/o/x students' perception of college affordability and the financial resources available to pay for college influence this stage. Even when students have been provided with assistance on the financial aid processes and receive admission to a four-year institution, as many as 70% may reconsider enrolling when faced with their economic realities, or experience summer melt by changing their mind to enroll in college (Acevedo, 2013; Arnold et al., 2009; Cox, 2016). The seventh and final stage of college-conocimiento focuses on spiritual activism, defined by students' ability to navigate resources and advocate for themselves. Students may enter this stage at different points in the college choice process depending on their ability and need to advocate for their needs.

While much research has been conducted on college choice, using *college-conocimiento* (Acevedo-Gil, 2017) and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice together allows for a greater understanding of different factors influencing college choice for first-generation Latina/o/x students. Perna's (2006) conceptual model considers the various contexts across different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups that influence enrollment decisions. The model recognizes the layered economic and sociological factors that influence college choice for particular groups of students. *College-conocimiento* helps better contextualize the timing of enrollment decisions and influences at different stages of the college choice process that are more nuanced and nonlinear than Perna's conceptual model. Together these frameworks guide understanding of the college enrollment decisions of first-generation Latina/o/x students that attend more well-resourced public high schools.

### **Literature Review**

Individual, school, and community-level factors influence enrollment levels for Latina/o/x students across different higher education institutions. These factors lead to various social and cultural capital levels that impact a first-generation Latina/o/x student's college choice. One of the primary individual-level factors is students' college-going identity. As such, the following literature first describes the Latina/o/x college choice process that shapes first-generation Latina/o/x's college-going identity. The review continues on to explain the role high schools and community settings play in influencing first-generation Latina/o/x students' college aspirations and college choice.

#### **First-Generation Latina/o/x College-Going Identity**

Latina/o/x students are more likely to be first-generation college students navigating the college choice process without parents who can draw on their college experiences to provide

guidance (Clayton et al., 2019). Among first-generation Latina/o/x students, their college-going identity may form at different points of their educational journey. While it may develop as early as primary school, for many, it may not take form until high school as students become influenced by their high school's college-going culture and expectations (Liou et al., 2009). Having a college-going identity implies an active pursuit of becoming college-ready by taking the necessary coursework to develop the academic resilience to navigate college-level academics (Conley, 2007).

In conjunction with the school, many Latina/o/x students form their college-going identity through their information networks made up of immediate and extended family members and peers that influence their college choice process. Information networks transmit social capital about what it means to be college-going and college-ready (Liou et al., 2009). Using chain migration theory, Person and Rosenbaum (2006) explored how Latina/o/x students made their college decisions by examining the influence of their information networks made up of students' families, peers, and extended community. They argued that students were likely to choose colleges where they knew someone from their network who was currently attending or who had previously attended. In communities where students are the first in their families to go to college, students often rely on their family and peer networks to gather the information they may not have ready access to in their immediate home (Clayton et al., 2019; Perez & McDonough, 2008).

While exposing first-generation Latina/o/x students to college possibilities, information networks may also limit the scope of information students receive (Perez & McDonough, 2008). The limitations may be more evident when understanding how Latina/o/x students evaluate college options. Holland (2020) describes how first-generation students are less likely to enroll in

selective institutions than their peers who have college-educated parents. Depending on the social capital resources available in their networks, Latina/o/x students may have varying levels of access to more selective college experiences (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Due to possible limitations in their networks, first-generation Latina/o/x students must frequently turn to schools and college access programs to serve as sources of capital to help shape their college-going identity and navigate their college choice process (Means & Pyne, 2016).

College expectations can further strengthen students' college-going identity, whether expected by an educator, family member, or mentor (Bryan et al., 2018; Dyce et al., 2013). In a qualitative study, Acevedo (2020) examined how Latina/o/x educators cultivated college aspirations in an urban high school. She found that the college-going support structures at the school were not enough to support students. Educators played an active role in shaping students' college aspirations based on the expectations they messaged to students and how they integrated college talk into their curriculum. The success of cultivating college aspirations in Acevedo's (2020) case study was primarily due to the school's intentional focus on getting Latina/o/x students to identify as college-going, which may not be the norm in well-resourced, suburban high schools with lower Latina/o/x student enrollment. Without the intentional school focus present in Acevedo's (2020) case study, first-generation Latina/o/x students more often have limited networks and capital to access college information and resources (Kurlaender, 2006). First-generation college-going identity usually requires students to take personal responsibility for their education, be grounded in cultural values of self-reliance, and navigate the college choice process independently (Clayton et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

## **The Role of High Schools and Community Settings**

High schools and community settings are essential factors to consider in cultivating a college-going identity among first-generation Latina/o/x students. Examining a high school's organizational habitus includes its college-going culture and its institutional agents that can support and detract first-generation Latina/o/x students along their college choice process. Community settings are another source of influence that can complement what happens at school or bridge existing gaps present at school. The following section discusses the role high schools and community settings play in a first-generation Latina/o/x students' college choice process and their influence on students' college-going identity.

### ***High School habitus***

High schools play a critical role in shaping first-generation Latina/o/x students' college-going identity and supporting them to access college. A school's organizational habitus can thus shape a student's habitus. The organizational habitus is the combination of a school's mission and resources that create the common perceptions, expectations, and aspirations that students hold about college (McDonough, 1997). A high school's organizational habitus includes its college-going culture that norms college-going behaviors and the kind of support instituted within the school to help students get into college (Cipollone & Stich, 2017; McDonough, 1997; Roska & Robinson, 2017). Examining a school's organizational habitus by looking at its mission, counseling structure, and curricular offerings can highlight how it provides or lacks equitable opportunities and systems for first-generation Latina/o/x students to leverage college resources (Cipollone & Stich, 2017). It is largely assumed that the benefits of cultural capital at a well-resourced school can equally benefit all students (Roska & Robinson, 2017). Proximity to resources, however, does not mean students are using resources equitably or possess the

knowledge on how to use the support available. Other research suggests that college aspirations must be supported by structures that guide students through the college application process because aspirations alone do not lead to four-year enrollment outcomes (Lee et al., 2017).

**College-going culture.** One of the main ways high schools influence individual students' habitus is through their college-going culture that promotes and influences college expectations and college-going behaviors. In well-resourced schools, college-going cultures are embedded in a school's organizational habitus and made up of two elements: the college expectations that counselors, teachers, and coaches have for students and college talk—the way these adults speak about college to students (Bryan et al., 2018). The high school's structures transmit college-going culture through college counseling, coursework, and extracurricular activities that promote college-going habits (Achinstein et al., 2015; Cipollone & Stich, 2017; McDonough, 1997). McDonough's (1997) cross-case analysis of four different high schools located in suburban, upper-middle-class neighborhoods illustrates the variety of counseling structures and college preparatory courses that the 12 participants received from their high school based on their counselor's role in the college choice process, the types of colleges promoted, and their availability. College preparatory courses and early college advising also served as primary resources for enhancing college access for the 12 participants (McDonough, 1997). Additionally, Holland's (2015) study in two suburban, well-resourced high schools with similar strong college-going cultures found that 90% of the student sample enrolled in two and four-year colleges. Taking college preparatory courses, which all high schools in both studies offered, prepares students for college-level coursework and can create an academic environment that allows for college talk and college expectations (Athanasas et al., 2016). However, academic rigor is often lacking in high-need schools where a significant portion of Latina/o/x students attend (Athanasas

et al., 2016). Even though over 80% of Latina/o/x high school students report having college aspirations, many cannot realize their postsecondary goals due to the lack of access to college preparatory coursework (Acevedo, 2020; Cox, 2016). In Holland's (2015) and McDonough's (1997) studies, Latina/o/x enrollment was low at all high school samples, with the highest Latina/o/x enrollment of 20% at one suburban high school. Further research is needed in well-resourced high schools with larger Latina/o/x college enrollment.

College-going cultures can be vital for first-generation and lower SES students as they evaluate college options and uphold college expectations messaged by their schools (Bryan et al., 2018). How high schools speak about college options can influence where first-generation Latina/o/x students choose to enroll. Some high schools' college-going cultures may place more value on four-year college pathways while stigmatizing other pathways (Holland, 2015). High schools influence how students define a best-fit-college and "undermatch" by choosing less selective colleges than what may match their academic achievements (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Lee et al., 2017). Undermatching is most prevalent among students attending urban and disadvantaged public high schools (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Lee et al., 2017). According to Holland (2020), evaluating college options requires cultural knowledge about rankings and evaluative methods to classify colleges. However, first-generation students may be more inclined to evaluate colleges by other criteria like proximity to home or through their social networks based on where they know peers have attended (Perez & McDonough, 2008).

With limited cultural knowledge about colleges and with the influence of their school's college-going culture, first-generation students are more likely to enroll in less selective colleges (Holland, 2020). Through a qualitative study, Holland (2020) offers three frames through which first-generation students evaluated college options: the incidental frame where students didn't



consider school characteristics and focused solely on attending college, the limited frame where students had a narrow set of criteria they wanted in a college, and the personal fit frame where students viewed college as a transformative discovery process. The study found that although a few students used the personal fit frame, this frame was used most by counselors when speaking to students about college, which resulted in ineffective conversations to evaluate college options. Students' cultural knowledge and social networks informed how they considered college options. Depending on how students evaluate options, they may make college decisions that don't match their academic and financial needs, impacting their long-term persistence and degree attainment (Holland, 2020). In addition to perpetuating social inequalities, stigmatizing any postsecondary education pathway can further push first-generation students to pursue a pathway that may not match their needs (Holland, 2015). This can be detrimental for first-generation students whose primary source of college knowledge is their high school (Kurlaender, 2019).

While college-going cultures can support first-generation students in developing college aspirations, they can also reinforce inequalities by cultivating high college expectations and failing to account for the different resources students have to realize those expectations (Holland, 2015). First-generation Latina/o/x students are more likely to deal with stigma toward colleges they pursue due to their limited resources, finances, and college information than their middle-class peers (Holland, 2015). First-generation Latina/o/x students attending well-resourced schools presumably have access to social and cultural capital by simply attending a school whose organizational habitus has created a robust college-going culture (Cipollone & Stich, 2017; McDonough, 1997, Roska & Robinson, 2017). However, expecting the same college enrollment outcomes for all students because of the resources assumed to be readily available to all students

in high-resourced high schools hides inequitable support or a lack of supportive structures that perpetuate inequality (Roska & Robinson, 2017).

**Institutional agents.** Institutional agents, as part of a school's resources, are adults at schools who hold positions of power and actively promote and support college-going behaviors within schools that Latina/o/x students often rely on for college guidance (Bryan et al., 2018; Kurlaender, 2006; Liou et al., 2009). Perez and McDonough (2008) suggest these institutional agents are most critical during students' early decisions about pursuing college. Unfortunately, in the quantitative study by Bryan et al. (2018), they found that even when adults held high expectations for students to go to college, these expectations were not coupled with support structures to help students apply to and attend college. The study showed a lack of trusting relationships between institutional agents and students, which are fundamental in supporting first-generation students. (Bryan et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Counselors can serve as institutional agents and provide social capital through college guidance that equip first-generation Latina/o/x students with the necessary information to pursue college (Roska & Robinson, 2016). High school context must be considered when understanding the relationship between counselors and students. In some high school contexts lacking strong college-going cultures, speaking with a counselor may be the primary source of social and cultural capital a student can access for college guidance (Roska & Robinson, 2016). However, in high schools with strong college-going cultures, counselors may serve a more transactional purpose by focusing on course scheduling and general advice that encourages less selective two-year institutions (McDonough, 1997). Considering the large counselor caseloads at public schools and the competing priorities expected of counselors, building trust with students may not be feasible (Holland, 2015, 2020; McDonough, 1997). Without a trusting relationship, first-

generation students may not access their counselor and know what kind of support to seek from them (Roska & Robinson, 2016). However, as college-going supports evolve, counselors are no longer the only source of college information. They were once gatekeepers of information and advised students according to personal biases that gave higher SES students an advantage (Holland, 2015). All students can now access college guidance through various methods that have emerged to address low enrollment rates among first-generation Latina/o/x students (Holland, 2015; Liou et al., 2009).

Teachers can also serve as institutional agents who can reinforce college-going cultures. In a case study at a public charter school, teachers created classroom environments that allowed for college-level discussions and academically rigorous work intended to prepare students for higher education (Athanasios et al., 2016). Not only did teachers at this charter school set up structures to academically prepare students, but they intentionally talked about college topics, which was one of the few spaces where many of the first-generation students received college exposure. However, much like counselors, most teachers are too overwhelmed and overworked to teach topics or skills needed for college in their classrooms (Achinstein et al., 2015). When teachers serve as information sources for first-generation Latina/o/x students, they often do this informally through their conversations with students that may take place outside of instruction time (Liou et al., 2009). Research has shown that when students have caring adults at school, they will likely perform better academically (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006). Much of these relationships are dependent on how teachers act on their perceptions and expectations of students (Liou et al., 2009). Teacher expectations influence students' academic achievement, which can predict college enrollment for lower SES students. Studies have shown that Latina/o/x students benefit from high teacher expectations (Acevedo, 2020).

In addition to institutional agents, peers can further shape and reinforce a school's college-going culture, and the degree of social capital first-generation Latina/o/x students may access for college-going efforts. If peers have accurate college information, they can positively influence first-generation students and provide college information received from institutional agents (Hill et al., 2015). Hill et al. (2015) found in a quantitative study comparing student surveys from two urban high schools that most students in their sample, 74% of which were Latina/o/x or African American, heavily relied on peers as sources of college information. As Holland (2015) discussed the importance of trusting relationships that encourage students to access guidance, first-generation students may hold the most important trusting relationships with their peers with whom they interact more frequently and may feel more comfortable discussing their college aspirations (Hill et al., 2015). Thus, first-generation Latina/o/x students may turn to peers more frequently over school counselors or teachers for college guidance. Similarly, Perez and McDonough (2008) use chain migration theory to illustrate how first-generation Latina/o/x students may make college decisions based on their social networks, including peers who have attended or are currently attending particular colleges. While this may be a great source of information for middle- or upper-class students who rely on their parents' capital and college experiences, first-generation students may be left with limited social networks (Hill et al., 2015; Holland, 2015). Hill et al. (2015) found that students who relied more heavily on their peers were less likely to pursue highly selective colleges as a first choice. Although college-going efforts can help first-generation students build their social network with other first-generation peers, the stronger influencers for college access tend to be the adults at their schools (Hill et al., 2015).

### *Community Settings*

While high schools may provide the support that many first-generation Latina/o/x students need to pursue their college aspirations, the support may be complemented with outside-of-school support that may be better positioned to address the socioeconomic factors that most affect college access for lower SES students (Dyce et al., 2013; Means & Pyne, 2016).

Community settings can help first-generation Latina/o/x students navigate the hidden structural and institutional barriers present at school (Cipollone & Stich, 2017; Dyce et al., 2013; Jarsky et al., 2009). These kinds of support are often delivered through community-based programs that focus on college access and preparation (Dyce et al., 2013). College access programs frequently focus on improving academic preparation, providing college admission information, and increasing a student's ability to secure financial aid resources (Means & Pyne, 2016).

Preparation programs were born out of the challenge both high schools and colleges face: academically preparing students and recruiting and retaining them in higher education (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Through college preparation programs, students may have access to college exposure opportunities like summer programs on college campuses or college visits that equip students with more college knowledge (Means & Pyne, 2016). Bergerson (2009) found that successful college access programs provided academic support, skill development, mentorship that nurtured college aspirations, and financial resources. Others argue that programs must involve families in the process while utilizing students' capital and taking a community-of-wealth approach in working with students and their families so that they can leverage alternative networks to the traditional ones associated with college-going (Liou et al., 2009; Yosso 2005).

College access programs are uniquely positioned to support first-generation Latina/o/x students with their college aspirations because they may take a holistic approach to advise

students. Studies examining their effectiveness found that they are increasing the number of underrepresented students who have college aspirations (Dyce et al., 2013). Participants in college access programs have acquired the college-going capital needed to pursue college that may be lacking from their high school experiences (Bergins et al., 2007; Means & Pyne, 2016). By employing a community-of-wealth approach, college access programs may afford the ability to more effectively work with students' families and thus, improve college attainment support for first-generation Latina/o/x students who can't rely on their parents' college experiences (Dyce et al., 2013).

Familial involvement is an essential component of college access programs because of their influence on students' college choice process and increased likelihood of college enrollment (Dyce et al., 2013; Roska & Robinson, 2016). According to Tierney and Jun (2001), college access programs should leverage the social, cultural, and inspirational capital that families already hold rather than othering nondominant cultural values. In a quantitative study, Dyce et al. (2013) found that 83% of the student sample reported they talked the most about college with family members who were the main source of college information students relied on to navigate the college choice process. First-generation students hold personal responsibility for their education and turn to their sources of capital to navigate the college choice process, which often lies with family (Liou et al., 2009; Roska & Robinson, 2017). In their quantitative study, Roska and Robinson (2017) found that all students were more likely to pursue college, regardless of their high school's organizational habitus, and benefited from holding high expectations for their own education when their parents also had high expectations.

Involving first-generation Latina/o/x families in their student's college choice process through a community-of-cultural-wealth approach requires the decentering of dominant culture

values (Achinstein et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005). First-generation Latina/o/x students can develop a college-going identity without eliminating other parts of their cultural identity that may not align with dominant cultural values associated with being college-going (Achinstein et al., 2015; Oakes, 2003). Achinstein et al.'s (2015) notion of multicultural capital validates nondominant values, linking families' college-going norms embedded in Latina/o/x values like hard work and *ganas*, the effort to keep going when challenges arise. College access programs and other community settings can celebrate students' intersectional identities in ways that may not be possible in school settings, especially where the Latina/o/x student population is low. College access programs actively promote social mobility and can create a college choice process that is grounded in Latina/o/x experiences (Roska & Robinson, 2017).

Although previous studies have focused on understanding how social and cultural capital transmits in school settings, many focus on urban high school environments and charter schools. Studies are looking at school settings in isolation from community settings that also contribute to college choice navigation. Research looking at college access programs and ways they may provide access to social and cultural capital outside of school settings for first-generation students is minimal. We have yet to examine social and cultural capital in well-resourced high schools and community settings together to understand how they shape the college choice process for first-generation Latina/o/x students.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methods**

This research study used qualitative methodology to understand how first-generation, Latina/o/x students accessed and used social and cultural capital to navigate the college choice process in their school and community settings. Qualitative research uncovers human experiences more deeply (Louie, 2016), which allows for examining students' experiences in high school and within their communities. This is critical to understanding how the capital students accessed across different settings influenced their college choice process. Qualitative methodology can uncover the complexities and historical context needed to understand the college choice process for first-generation students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative approach for this study allowed students to reflect on their own experiences while in high school and share their interpretation about what led to their college choice, considering the varying factors at home and in school (Louie, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Enrolled college students shared their high school experiences inside and outside of high school to highlight the supports and barriers they faced, the people involved in their college choice process, and their perceptions and student identities that influenced their college choice process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ask students about these experiences. Through this approach, the study highlighted high school and community factors that most influenced first-generation, Latina/o/x students' college choice process, which informs practices that can decrease barriers to access higher education for first-generation, Latina/o/x students.

### **Setting**

The study was set in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. The Peninsula located in the Bay Area houses the heart of Silicon Valley, an area often associated with innovative



technology, ideas, and proximity to elite universities like UC Berkeley and Stanford. There are over 40 public and private colleges and universities in the Bay Area—22 community colleges, five California State Universities (CSU), one University of California (UC), and over a dozen private institutions (College Simply, 2021). The proximity to several higher education college systems make the Bay Area an educational oasis with high accessibility to several public postsecondary options (Hillman & Boland, 2018). As an oasis, the Bay Area is a prime setting for this study because there is a concentration of high schools with college-going cultures and several college access programs to support first-generation students attending these high schools.

The study centered on students who attended one of three public high schools in a district located in the Peninsula that serves more than 10,000 9th to 12th-grade students. About 37% of students in the district are eligible for free/reduced lunch, and 45% identify as Hispanic/Latino (California Department of Education, 2020). Even though the Hispanic/Latino students' high school graduation rate in the district is 80.2%, only 45.7% of this student population is completing UC/CSU requirements, as indicated in table 1. Although these percentages encompass all students in the district, the study focused on students attending the three comprehensive, non-charter high schools in the district. The study focused on students who attended: High School A, High School B, and High School C.

**Table 1: Cohort Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Requirements in Focal District by Race/Ethnicity, 2016-2020**

Race/Ethnicity	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
American Indian or Alaska Native	Redacted	Redacted	45.5%	Redacted
Asian	92.5%	94.3%	81.4%	87.1%
Black or African American	15.8%	30.6%	38.9%	48.8%
Filipino	74.5%	81.5%	62.5%	64.7%
Hispanic or Latino	42.5%	40.1%	39.2%	45.7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	14%	26%	18.6%	31%
None Reported	Redacted	Redacted	Redacted	Redacted
Two or More Races	76%	71.2%	80.6%	75.3%
White	78.8%	85.3%	76.3%	81.7%

*Source: Education Data Partnership, California Department of Education*

The three focal public high schools (A, B, and C) are well-resourced and spend about \$20,000 per pupil compared to the state average of \$12,500 and \$15,000 of other neighboring districts in the Peninsula (Niche, 2021). They also offered a variety of advanced coursework in 2019-2020, ranging from 19 advanced placement courses at High School C, 27 at High School A, and 29 advanced placement and International Baccalaureate courses at High School B (UCOP, 2018). The high availability of advanced coursework in these high schools is one of the resources students can access to become college-ready and competitive for college admissions. The three high schools had a similar 18:1 student to teacher ratio, with teachers having an average of 10 years of teaching experience (California Department of Education, 2020). Each school has a college and career center with a full-time college advisor and an established Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID) program that supports first-generation students with the college process. Students attending these schools have access to experienced teachers, the opportunity to take rigorous, advanced coursework, and additional programs on campus that can prepare them for college. These may all be resources that impact a student’s ability to become college competitive and contribute to a school’s college-going culture. These

characteristics make this ideal for this study because they provide different forms of social and cultural capital that can influence a first-generation students' college choice process.

All three of these high schools also partner with the Boys & Girls Club of the Peninsula's (BGCP) college success program. The program supports underrepresented students into and through college. Students receive college advice to support their college and financial aid applications. Through monthly workshops taking place on students' high school campuses and in BGCP facilities located in the students' communities, they develop social-emotional skills, including advocating for their needs, accessing resources, and building supportive networks. In 2019, when the program launched its postsecondary support it served over 400 high school and college students. Most students were first-generation—82% were Latino, 9% were Black, and 2% were Pacific Islander (BGCP, 2019). Students can join the program during their sophomore or junior year of high school so long as they desire to attend college. The program aims to have 90% of students enroll and graduate from a four-year college. Unlike other college success programs, this program is one of the few at partner campuses that accepts students without academic eligibility criteria and is committed to supporting students in high school and through postsecondary education, regardless of college pathway. Based on the program services and goals, provided a unique setting to explore the ways schools and communities provided social and cultural capital that shaped students' college choice.

In addition to similar educational program offerings and access to BGCP's college success program, the three high schools are located in suburban environments where the median monthly rent is upward of \$2,500, and the median home values are close to \$2 million (Niche, 2021). This district serves students across different communities, affluent and working class, creating socioeconomic diversity and inequality. Students living in one of the wealthiest areas in

the nation are attending school with students living in working-class households (Borden, 2020). The diversity in this region may create opportunities for students of all backgrounds to develop social and cultural capital while also creating divisions that exacerbate gaps in academic achievement. The opportunities to equalize social and cultural capital may be few and far between depending on the school's ability to create meaningful opportunities for students of different backgrounds to engage with each other.

### **Sample**

The sample consists of twelve students who participated in the study in 2022. The participants self-identified as first-generation, Latina/o/x. As first-generation, they were students whose parent(s) did not earn a college degree in an American higher education institution. All students were in college at the time of participating in the study during the 2021-2022 academic year. They reflected on their college choice process from when they were high school seniors. Participants were also a part of BGCP's college success program during their senior year of high school and already had a desire and intention to attend college. Twelve student participants were interviewed to achieve a fair balance and representation of students who attended a community college and a four-year college. Seven participants were enrolled at four-year colleges and five participants were enrolled in community college. Ten of the participants identified as female and two identified as male. There were three participants who attended High School A, four students who attended High School B, and five students who attended High School C. Each student participant was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity as indicated in table 2.

**Table 2: Student Participants**

<i>Student Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>High School Graduation</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Year in College</i>
Angela	Female	A	2021	Cañada Community College	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Gaby	Female	C	2019	San Jose State University	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year
Heather	Female	A	2021	De Anza Community College	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Isaac	Male	B	2020	California Baptist University	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year
Jessica	Female	C	2020	Chapman University	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year
Lorena	Female	B	2021	UC Berkeley	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Marcy	Female	C	2021	Northeastern University	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Sam	Male	C	2021	Cañada Community College	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Sarah	Female	B	2021	UC Berkeley	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Selena	Female	B	2019	Stanford University	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year
Tania	Female	C	2021	De Anza Community College	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Veronica	Female	A	2020	De Anza Community College	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year

**Data Collection**

I relied on BGCP membership data to identify prospective participants as the program membership enrollment form asks students about race and ethnic identity. After generating the prospective student list of high school graduates between the years 2019-2021 who identify as Hispanic/Latino and attended one of the three high schools, an email was sent inviting them to participate in the study. These program years were used to generate a prospective student list because students from these graduating classes participated in the same BGCP college success program while in high school. Classes prior to 2019 participated in a different BGCP college access program. The email sent to prospective students included a link to a pre-interview survey (see Appendix A) to determine if a student met the demographic and college enrollment criteria

to move forward as a participant. The pre-interview survey gathered the demographic information needed to meet the criteria to participate in the study which included whether a student identified as Latina/o/x and was first-generation. In addition to the demographic criteria, the pre-interview survey also asked about high school and college enrollment, the second set of criteria to participate in the study. Students needed to attend one of the three high schools from the same district and have graduated between the years 2019-2021. The study excluded students who attended the smaller charter schools in the district and students who participated in Middle College, a partnership program between the local community college and the school district, as these settings would have created a significant difference in high school experiences and resources.

For students who expressed interest in participating in the study, program data was used to reference students' college lists of where they applied and were granted admission during their senior year. This data provided context on whether they had received admission to at least two four-year colleges and therefore had multiple options to choose from. In addition to meeting the demographic criteria, the selection criteria for participating in the study consisted of receiving multiple admission offers to four-year institutions and enrolling in college during the fall academic term following a student's high school graduation. During the first round of outreach, 22 students met the full criteria to participate in the study. However, there were only two students who chose to enroll in community college and only two students who had attended High School A so I decided to solicit more representation from students who enrolled in community college and from students who graduated from High School A. During the second round of outreach, I had three more students meet the full criteria and increased representation of community college students and students who had graduated from High School A. As I narrowed

down the participant list and invited students to participate, I conducted purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to intentionally consider high school context differences concerning social and cultural capital development and differences in enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges. To do so, I prioritized inviting students where there was less representation such as community college first and then continued to invite other students. In order to achieve a balance of perspectives, I ranked student invitations and moved down the list if I did not hear back from students after two attempts while working toward an equal number of students per high school and between community college and four-year college enrollment. I also attempted to balance students in their first, second, or third year in college, however, most students who responded to the initial invitation to participate were students in their first year of college.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students who met the criteria as determined by the pre-interview survey. My research questions focused on uncovering how their high school experiences, inside and outside of school, led them to access social and cultural capital that influenced their college choice process. Asking about how the activities that the school put on to help students get to college impacted each students' ability to go to college was among the questions asked about students' high school experience at school, while questions about their experiences in applying to college when they were not on campus were asked to understand their college choice process outside of school. To further uncover the influence of social and cultural capital on college choice, students were asked to describe their college-decision process and how they decided to enroll into the college they did and what most helped them make this decision. Understanding students' experiences required "a less structured alternative" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110) to allow the flexibility to respond and direct

questions according to what participants shared. The interview protocol found in Appendix B guided the 45 to 60-minute interviews.

Interviews were scheduled using Google Forms and conducted via video calls based on each participant's availability. Gift cards were offered to student participants as an incentive to complete their interview and distributed to participants following their interview. Each student was reminded of their scheduled interview the day prior to their interview. Before starting each interview, student participants were reminded of the purpose of the interview and that their responses were confidential. Interviews were video recorded. Recordings were transcribed within a week of conducting the interview. During the interviews, I jotted down notes of participants' responses followed by an analytical memo that captured detailed observations and an immediate reflection on the interview. All student participant information was kept confidential and stored in password-protected cloud-based folders. Pseudonyms were used when referencing any participant and school data.

### **Data Analysis**

After conducting, transcribing, and reading all interviews, I began the coding process intended to organize the data by assigning "some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects" to easily identify and reference (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199). I had two cycles of coding. The first cycle consisted of inductive analysis with a "learn as you go approach that spontaneously creates original codes" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 41). I used In Vivo and concept coding to understand students' experiences accessing social and cultural capital at school and in their community. In Vivo codes included "College Competitive" to capture how students described the resources from their high school that they used to prepare for college and "Distance from Home" to summarize one of several ways students weighed college options and moved between



the seven stages of *college-conocimiento*. Concept coding included codes like “College Application Support at School” and “College Knowledge & Readiness at School” to identify the specific ways the high schools provided social and cultural capital to aid students’ college-going efforts. To differentiate, codes like “BGCP” or “First-Gen College Community” identified ways student gained capital outside of school to understand how students accessed capital in different settings. Other codes like “Financial Aid Influence,” “Friends Influence,” and “Family Influence on Choice” identify different influences that moved students through the different stages of *college-conocimiento* based on their options during their decision-making process. I documented these codes in a codebook as the analysis continued using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS).

During my second coding cycle, I started by counting code frequencies and identifying patterns among the codes with higher frequencies. I placed codes into categories to identify themes and emerging concepts based on whether codes provided students access to social and cultural capital at school, outside of school or in both types of settings. During this second stage of coding, I also referenced the analytic memos that I wrote following each interview that focused on immediate reflections and how student responses represented different aspects of the literature. As I referenced the analytic memos, I looked for how they may capture the codes with higher frequencies and therefore, capture emerging themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

I exercised reflexivity to check for assumptions or biases by putting in place member checks to “solicit feedback” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) on findings. Member checks required sharing my preliminary findings and analysis with students interviewed to allow them to comment on whether my interpretations and codes were accurate to their experiences. This was

especially critical when checking for interview transcription codes since “coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). I contacted all student participants via email and shared a list of quotes that corresponded to their individual interview along with the codes attached to each quote to check if the codes attached to each quote captured what they intended to share. I received confirmation from ten of the twelve participants that the shared quotes and codes accurately captured what they meant with what they shared. These student confirmations informed the quotes shared in the findings chapter. Since my research questions aim to understand access to social and cultural capital, it was important to check for the accuracy of my findings to ensure my interpretation of codes aligned with students’ experiences.

### **Positionality**

I am a first-generation Latina from an immigrant, working-class Mexican family. I attended a high school in the Peninsula, like the partner schools the students who participated in this study attended. While in high school, I participated in a college access program much like the one I now direct through BGCP that serves high school and college students. I work closely with the partner schools, students, and their families. I consider myself an insider to the BGCP student community that shares similar experiences to my own. Over 75% of the students we serve at BGCP are first-generation, Latina/o/x students living in working-class households and have parents who predominantly speak Spanish. My tenure with BGCP and shared experiences with students and families have allowed me to be treated as an insider and build rapport quickly with the communities we serve to learn about the needs that can inform our practices to shape our programs. Much of this information has been provided openly, consistently, and quickly. I attribute this to looking like students, speaking the same language, and understanding first-hand

some of the cultural values that influence student outcomes. I recognize the opportunity I had to gain more insight into students' experiences because of their relationships with our program. I believe it allowed for more genuine conversations where students felt comfortable and reflective about their experiences without needing to spend a great deal of time building rapport with them.

I chose to embark on this study to honor the experiences of first-generation, Latina/o/x students and highlight the consistent frustrations I've heard over the years about navigating high school spaces. This research highlights those experiences and provides more extensive insight into how multiple issues are interconnected between high school and higher education systems. Villenas (1996) discusses the importance of not performing research on people and "othering" them, but instead studying and learning alongside in partnership which was possible through the existing partnership participants already had with BGCP. Qualitative research that provides a fuller story (Louie, 2016) kept student voices at the forefront of this study.

### **Limitations**

Due to the unique context of the Peninsula, there may be perceived limitations on the applicability of learnings from this study to a significantly different environment. However, the study was not attempting to be generalizable. The diverse identities captured through the first-generation, Latina/o/x identity may create gender, immigration, and socioeconomic status differences that were not controlled for but surfaced as influences on college choice.

Additionally, students reflected on their college choice process from previous academic years, some during a global pandemic when they spent most of their time attending school remotely. This not only influenced how they accessed resources and capital but also caused them to reflect on their college choice process differently as they completed their first year of college in person or in hybrid mode. I also recognize the response bias that may have occurred due to my

positionality and participants being familiar with my position within the BGCP's college success program. They may have been more inclined to discuss positive program experiences even after establishing they discuss openly and candidly their experiences. Regardless, the students provided insights on the understudied context of high resource areas that house vast socioeconomic diversity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how Latina/o/x students who attended well-resourced public high schools accessed social and cultural capital in their schools and community settings, and in what ways the social and cultural capital influenced their college choice process. This chapter presents the findings that emerged based on 12 interviews with first-generation Latina/o/x students who attended three well-resourced public high schools in the same high school district and who currently attend community colleges and four-year colleges. The interviews were conducted to understand students' experiences during high school, at home, and in their community while they navigated the college choice process.

The three themes that emerged included: familial influence on the college choice process, how students navigated being college-going in well-resourced and unwelcoming spaces and receiving college-going support within a community organization. The first theme centered on how familial cultural capital shaped students' motivations for pursuing higher education and where students ultimately decided to apply to and enroll. As first-generation students saw their pursuit for college as a way to honor their families' sacrifices and seek a better future. Based on their family's financial reality and cultural norms, students more often found themselves applying to schools closer to home. The second theme focused on how students often felt othered on their high school campus while also benefitting from the college-going cultures they were a part of, especially in their advanced classes. Their experiences were heavily influenced by the relationships they built with peers and teachers who influenced their college choice process. The third theme highlighted the support and influence of a community organization that provided college-going support outside of students' school setting. The social and cultural capital students

received through the program provided more individualized supports students reported as critical to understanding how college-going applied to their individual circumstances. The community organization influenced their college decision-making process in how they facilitated discussions between students and their families. Each theme is elaborated on further in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Familial Influence on College Choice Process**

Families represented a key form of cultural capital that students accessed at home and that influenced their habitus and orientation around higher education. Most students referenced how much their families stressed the importance of education throughout their lives. Students consistently reported that their desire to pursue college was a result of two factors connected to their families and home. The first was the constant and early messaging at home that college was an indicator of success. The second was how students perceived their families as a source of motivation. Students named their families being the primary reason why they were pursuing college. For students, attending college carried a higher purpose and was a way for them to honor their families' sacrifices. As such, families' influence was also present during *El Compromiso* stage of students' college choice process when students were planning and applying to colleges, as well as during the *Coyolxauhqui* stage of choosing a college. Families influenced the types of colleges students applied to and how they weighed different factors like distance from home, affordability, and cultural values in the decision-making process.

#### ***Source of Motivation***

Students turned to their parents, siblings, and extended family members' experiences as motivation for why they wanted to pursue college. Students also recognized the privilege they

had as students attending well-resourced high schools in the U.S., something they recognized their families did not have. Lorena, a first-year college student attending UC Berkeley said,

I first learned about college, probably in middle school, because that's around the time where my sisters were applying to college. But I couldn't exactly picture what it was...Being a first generation student, I feel like since my parents never got the chance to go to college, especially where they're from, they moved here to the United States. And they immigrated, and they uprooted their whole lives for my sisters and for me so we could have a better future...I modeled my high school activities by what my sisters did. But when I joined BUILD it was kind of changing because of lost funding so we weren't going to have the same type of experience that my sisters did...It wasn't until I found the Boys & Girls Club until I felt more like I'll be okay because that's where I found Future Grads where I could have people help me with the college process.

Lorena recognized that her opportunities as the youngest in her family were vastly different from her parents and older siblings. It was instilled in her early on that education was a valuable opportunity she was provided with. Since she was motivated to attend a four-year university she took advantage of the advanced coursework offered at her high school and participated in college success programs that could help her make college a reality. Since her older sisters had attended college, they provided Lorena with social capital about which programs to take advantage of like BUILD and AVID. Lorena had a reference point for what she needed to get to college by the time she entered high school.

Like Lorena, several students believed pursuing college was a way to honor the sacrifices their families made by moving to the U.S. to provide valuable opportunities for them that wouldn't have been possible in their home countries. The majority of students' parents were

immigrants who had moved from their home countries seeking better opportunities for their children. Students felt the weight of their families' sacrifices and felt it was their responsibility to pursue college to validate those sacrifices. This responsibility students felt early on influenced how early they prepared for college and how strong their determination was to persist to get to college. For example, Lorena says,

College is always a thing I should do, kind of like a duty, or like something that would make my parents proud for everything they sacrifice. So that was a factor that I considered heavily in my decision to go to college. So not just what I wanted, but what my parents hoped for me.

Lorena described going to college as a duty while also being something she wanted for herself and knew her parents wanted for her. The value her parents put on education is the familial cultural capital her parents provided her that indicated to her that college was something worthwhile and influenced her school behavior to prepare for college.

Similarly, Isaac, a second-year student attending California Baptist University, expressed similar motivation for why he knew he needed to do well in school,

My parents are immigrants. So I think it's always embedded in our culture that school is kind of the only route to take, because our parents come to this country, and they work, they work their lives off throughout their time here. My dad got here when he was 17. So he knew that the only option for his kids were to go to school because he never got to finish his college because it was almost impossible in Mexico, so he knew he had to go out to the US. So it was always embedded in my family that we had to go to school.

Isaac referenced his father's experience and what his father couldn't accomplish in Mexico that he believed he needed to in the U.S. It was a given in his family that school was the pathway to



success and why his family moved to the U.S. While it appeared to be an expectation from his father, Isaac also used his father's experience as the reason for why he knew he needed to go to college.

Another student, Veronica, a second-year attending De Anza Community College, described the message her parents gave her,

Neither my mom nor my dad went to college. So they always pushed me telling me 'You have to go to college, you're the first. So you have to, you have to do it for your family because you're smart because you can, because we've worked our lives for you to go to college.' And you know, I appreciate it, because my parents did all that for me to have a better education.

As a student who moved to the U.S. right before starting high school, Veronica was able to appreciate the education she received at her high school and contrast her schooling experiences from her home country to the U.S. She also recognized that her parents did not have the same educational opportunity and agreed with their messaging of why it was so important she take advantage of these opportunities.

### ***Proximity to Home***

In addition to influencing students' motivation for going to college, families also influenced students' college choice. Students were more likely to pursue college choices that were close to home because they felt a need and responsibility to stay close to family. Heather, a first-year student attending De Anza Community College, discussed her decision-making process,

I was like, Okay, I'm going to go to LA. Because my mind was: I got to grow up without my family. I got to grow without depending on anybody. And it was really hard. I had

thought of being a creator for YouTube. When I had that idea, it all flopped because I realized I really cared about my mom and my siblings to just leave.

Heather seemed to feel guilt for considering leaving her family and thought staying close to home meant showing her family that she cared. Even though she had goals about being a YouTube content creator and going to a college in Los Angeles would help her pursue this dream, she also thought about the impact her absence would have on her family if she left. Some other students associated leaving to college with leaving their family behind unnecessarily and almost demonstrating selfish behavior. There was also a fear some students had around distance and it straining their relationship with their family.

Gaby, a third-year student attending San Jose State, talked about her decision-making process and how hard it was to make a decision about where to enroll because she felt like she needed to stay close to her parents who didn't have other relatives in the U.S.,

What was most challenging, I think was deciding based on proximity—deciding based on distance. And that's just because I think it may tie into being first-gen on how you're so family oriented. And I think I was even more family oriented because I don't have cousins here, I don't have aunts and uncles or anything. So it's really tight-knit. And so being away from home, I wasn't scared of being homesick. But in a way, it was very weird, because I've never had a similar experience.

Gaby believed being family-oriented during this process meant being near her parents. Even if she could handle being further away from home, she did not believe her parents could handle being far from one of the only family members they had in the U.S.

Choosing San Jose State, a college near most of these students' home communities, also seemed like the easier option as it did for other students who chose to stay close to home due to

their financial realities, especially students who decided to enroll in community college. Sam, a first-year student at Cañada Community College, talked about how financial reasons were the primary reason he decided to go to community college when asked what he considered when deciding on a college,

Definitely, cost—especially as a first-time student and while having multiple siblings. It's like what can you afford realistically, apart from financial aid, and how much debt you want to accrue during college. I guess location too and how easy it is to commute and stuff like that.

Sam recognized his financial reality and his family's circumstances with multiple siblings. He also recognized that a local community college would allow him the flexibility to commute and save on housing and transportation costs.

In addition to being perceived as the more affordable option, staying close to home seemed like a way for students to continue to support their families financially. Most community college students did not want their families burdened by college costs or to accrue debt because of their college pursuits. Community college students had multilayered decisions to make around their college choice. They wanted to make their families proud by attending college, specifically a four-year institution, but they also felt conflicted with the college costs they and their families would need to take on. However, some of the community college stigma they and their families held around the transfer pathway made their college choice difficult. Tania described the conversation she had with her mother and the back-and-forth she experienced as she considered her college choices between community college and the four-year institutions she was admitted to, but that would require significant financial contributions from her family. She said,

But that's when my mom told me, 'It's not only about us, it's you too. You're the one that's going to be attending there.' So that's how I got to community college where I found that balance. I want to be here and be here for my parents and be financially stable too. I love community college they helped me financially.

Even though Tania's mother encouraged her to choose the college that she most wanted and reassured Tania that they would figure it out, Tania kept the financial circumstances of her family at the center of her college decision. It was clear that Tania did not want to burden her parents financially knowing that she could pursue more affordable options. Tania reconciled her decision to attend community college by recognizing the financial benefits she would gain and the support she could provide her family if she stayed local. Her family's influence on her college choice was two-fold. Her family's financial circumstances pushed her to consider community college, while her desire to stay close to home helped her feel confident in her college choice.

Staying close to home was also a way for many students to feel like they were honoring their family's cultural values thus, influencing their selection to a more local college option. Students recognized that their parents' upbringing was vastly different from their own and that leaving for college and living on campus was a new American idea that clashed with parents' cultural traditions around when children should leave home. This not only influenced students' college choices but it highlighted the cultural differences students recognized they were up against. Gaby, a third-year at San Jose State, described the varying levels of navigation she engaged in to make a college choice and considered her parents' cultural values,

They're immigrants. So they're not super familiar with all these other places, either. And, you know, probably also being worried about me navigating new places on my own and

stuff like that. And it's not like, they can be like, 'Yeah, we went to college, we know what it's like, you know, you'll find your way with your friends and roommates and like, you'll do silly mistakes and stuff like that.' No. Mexican parents are going to be stricter on that type of stuff, at least mine. And then actually, I also have what I guess you could classify as conservative parents in terms of like, not moving out of the house, very strictly traditional, like, not moving out of the house until you're married and things like that, and that I feel like, you know, American parents, you know, they know, what the college lifestyle is like.

Gaby discussed the complexity of her parents' strict parenting which is grounded in their cultural and gender norms about when it's acceptable for a young woman like Gaby to move out. Gaby described her parents as conservative and traditional and contrasted why moving out for college would stray from their expectations, while being normal for American parents.

Students found themselves weighing their options against their family's customs or traditions and trying to pursue what would be a more accepted way to go to college. It was through external messaging, whether at school or through mentors, that students learned that it was acceptable to pursue alternate pathways that didn't follow cultural norms. This seemed to minimize the fear students expressed by pursuing and desiring to go to colleges far from home. Issac, a second-year attending California Baptist University, discussed how he processed his choice to go farther away from home,

I think the location was really big. It's so grounded in our culture to have to stay close. And it was really hard to be like, 'Okay, well, I'm gonna move.' But once in Future Grads, they taught me that it was okay to move, it's okay to do this. Because it's gonna affect you positively. It's not going to hurt you.

Isaac felt the need for permission to make his college choice and needed reassurance that his choice, even if further away, would not negatively impact him. His definition of distance from home was based on whether he would stay in California rather than go out of state. Southern California seemed like the right distance from home for him. Similarly, Jessica, a second-year at Chapman University, thought Southern California was the right distance from home. Only one student from the participants, Marcy, a first-year at Northeastern, went out of state. Several students held the notion that attending college nearby was a more strategic decision in case their family needed them, or they needed their family. Students who pursued colleges further away from home were students who had family support to do so or had received messaging that contradicted the dominant narrative at home.

Students yearned for their family's approval of their college choice. When they had their family's approval students seemed further committed to their choice. Approval from their family varied by whether they pursued a four-year institution over a community college, and how far their college was from home. Sara, a first-year at UC Berkeley, discussed her college list with her parents and it resulted in adding more local options like Santa Clara University and San Jose State. Sarah discussed her decision-making process and how proximity to home and financial aid available influenced her decision to go to UC Berkeley over USC, a dream school for her,

And then when it came to Cal, I was so excited, because it's close to home. I looked at my financial aid and thought there is better. But I wanted to go there. But then I got into USC and I was like, that's my dream school. I want to go there. So I was between USC, Cal, and Santa Clara because Santa Clara was offering a full ride and it's a really expensive school to go to. So that's really good. And then USC, I mean, I love that school. I still think about it. Sometimes I'm like, Oh my God, I wish I went there because

it's such a big campus, but I can still go there one day. And then Cal, I thought about it's close to home. And then shortly after I narrowed it down to those three they told me they wanted to interview me for Fiat Lux, which pays for everything. So that's when I was like, okay, depending on how that goes, I will decide, if I get it, I go to Cal. And then if I don't, then I'll go to USC. I found out that I got a scholarship so that's when I was like, okay, I'm going to Cal and it's close to home. And I like Berkeley because it feels like you're so far away from home. Like it just feels so different from [my hometown]. But it's it's so close.

While USC was clearly a top choice for Sarah, the financial aid and proximity to home made UC Berkeley a more compelling choice. It seemed to be the right distance from home that Sarah felt would be favorable for her family. With their fears and doubts, students felt comforted by their family's approval of their choice which influenced how they viewed their choice. Sarah described the comfort she felt with having her family visit Cal's campus with her,

But what helped me the most was, there was one day, when my whole family came to Berkeley and we all got Cal gear, and we had a photo shoot all throughout campus. And it made me really excited. It helped with the doubts and what I was overthinking. That helped me a lot.

Sharing the campus with her family comforted Sarah and gave her the confidence that she had made the right decision about her college choice. Her family was a source of motivation to pursue college while she prepared to apply and they continued to serve as stronger motivation as she started at UC Berkeley. Their influence extended beyond selecting a college and continued to influence how she perceived her decision.

## **Navigating College-Going in Well-Resourced, Unwelcoming Spaces**

The Latina/o/x students in the study largely benefitted from attending well-resourced schools that had strong college-going cultures that shaped their perceptions about their own college-going ability and influenced their college choices. However, students' high school experiences also required the constant navigation of unwelcoming spaces due to the racialized school climates they faced. Students felt alone and as if their first-generation and Latina/o/x identities did not belong when their identities were othered and distant from the dominant narrative in advanced classes. This was further magnified when students lacked meaningful relationships with teachers and other adults on campus. This impacted their willingness to seek and leverage the social and cultural capital they had access to on campus that could support and inform their college choice.

One of the primary resources available on all three high school campuses that students accessed was advanced courses, which helped them academically prepare for college's academic rigor. These classrooms became spaces where students gained social and cultural capital by understanding college-going expectations and behaviors that other students in these classes and at school modeled, such as the importance of being college competitive, participating in extracurricular activities, and building college lists. Some students recognized the academic preparation they benefitted from taking advanced courses at their high school that prepared them for college. Selena, a third-year student attending Stanford University, reflects on how her high school prepared her academically. She talks about her pursuit of the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma that required her to take the advanced courses offered at her high school and how this helped her,



The other one was the IB Diploma because it definitely helped me further develop my academic skills. And so when I came to Stanford, academically speaking, I did not feel out of place. I was definitely prepared. And so the IB Diploma helped me out a lot because I remember we had to do a paper [in college]. But my paper for IB was like 4000 words. So I was like, 'Oh, well, this is nothing because I've already done a long paper.'

So it definitely helped me be confident in my academic skills going into college.

Selena recognized the academic preparation and practice her IB classes provided, and she started college confident in her academic skills.

Within advanced classes, several students expressed feeling uncomfortable, especially when they felt others doubted their academic ability and when they were the only student of color. Unsure about the reasons for the doubt, Tania, described the environment in her AP English class,

Being the only Latina in class or only brown student you see a lot of doubts. I remember specifically for English we would have a fishbowl for discussions. No one will pick on me. No one will. And I don't know why. Maybe because I stood out or something. Or when I would say something, I always felt like I was the only challenged one as well.

Tania felt like her peers doubted her academic ability because they didn't engage with her at the same level as she observed others in the class interacted with each other. She believed this was because she was the only student of color in the class. These kinds of interactions influenced how much students were likely to participate and speak up in class. Sarah, an academically strong student currently attending UC Berkeley, described,

I always felt like I was just a quiet kid in class because I just didn't feel comfortable. This got worse in IB classes, because it's like, even when we would be in group projects, there

were two different situations that could happen. If we were in a group, people would see me and it's almost like they didn't trust me or think I was capable of doing work.

Sarah, like Tania, felt ignored and distrusted by her peers in advanced classes. This discouraged Sarah from participating in class and she expressed that this is why she often had to figure out what to do on her own instead of brainstorming with her peers. She also discussed the lack of community this left her within these classes. The doubt that students felt in advanced courses was influenced by how their peers treated them.

Advanced courses were a source of intimidation and where students were reminded of the differences and disadvantages they had compared to their white peers. Veronica, a second-year student attending De Anza Community College, reflected on her experience in AP English. She said,

I always felt intimidated. I always felt like I was at a disadvantage. Trying again, trying to catch up with everybody, trying to catch up to the students who have been here longer than anyone. I don't want to speak for anybody else. But I know, many of my close friends that were also taking AP English immediately, after a few days of being in the class, wanted to drop it because they didn't feel like they belonged.

Veronica highlights both her experiences as a first-generation and a newcomer student trying to catch up to her peers after being in the country and learning English for significantly fewer years than her classmates. She also mentioned the lack of belonging her friends felt that made them want to drop the course altogether. However, like other students, she also recognized the abundance of resources she had access to,

I would see other people take AP classes....so I feel like I had to catch up. And also again, having all those opportunities of all those classes that I could take, like endless

options of classes that I was offered. And not just the classes, but the clubs like cultural clubs, that was amazing. I love that.

Most students knew they needed to take advantage of the resources at their school, especially the advanced courses their school offered to prepare for college. However, it was not the rigor of the coursework that made most of these students feel like they couldn't persist but rather the lack of community in a space where they felt like they had very few shared experiences with their peers.

Peer doubts also influenced students' desire to take advanced courses that sometimes required teacher encouragement and reassurance. Sam, a first-year student at Cañada Community College, said, "After receiving a lot of encouragement, and positive feedback from a teacher, I decided to take Advanced Studies English and I remember feeling like I didn't fit in or that I wasn't good enough." Although Sam experienced difficult academic doubts in this new classroom environment, his teacher was instrumental in guiding him into these advanced placement courses that helped him access the academic resources available at his school. Several other students shared how when teachers took time to connect and encourage them, students were more willing to take on what seemed like a big challenge like taking advanced coursework.

Teacher encouragement also increased the likelihood of students reaching out for academic and college support, even if they experienced discomfort. Marcy, a first-year student currently attending Northeastern University described what her experience was with one of her AP English teachers,

I think some teachers were supportive. I feel like some of my teachers were willing to help out. I did go to office hours many times so my English teacher would always say, "Yeah, don't hesitate to ask questions" and "You can do well in this class."

Marcy is one of the few students who reported positive experiences with one of her teachers who was not also an AVID teacher. When students spoke about other teachers who offered encouragement, they expressed feelings of validation and described encouragement that came in the form of taking time outside of class time to offer guidance or support.

The environment in advanced courses aided in students' college-going efforts too. Marcy, described how her friends, many of which also took AP courses and were part of the Lacrosse team, influenced her process when she started building her college list,

A lot of my friends were talking about going out of state and they're like, 'Yeah, I want to go to New York. I want to go to Chicago,' and all these places. And I was like, hmm, that would be fun leaving California and going out of state and having new experiences both through college and also new environments. So that inspired me to look outside of California. Again, it was still in the back of my head, out-of-state tuition and all these things that come with it, like flights. But they did inspire me to look beyond California. And my sister did only apply to colleges in California. So looking out for me, I think my friends definitely had an impact on that.

Marcy started thinking about out-of-state options because she heard her immediate friend group discuss these options and their own college list. Marcy's older sister had only applied to schools in California, but the environment on the Lacrosse team exposed Marcy to other options. Marcy also recognized the benefits of taking several advanced courses, she says,

I took a lot of APs and I found that I was the only person of color in my APs because it was predominantly white students. But I also feel like a lot of Latinos did not take APs. But that motivated me to apply to college because I need to make a difference. We need to step up and do all these amazing things like other people are doing.

Unlike most other students who took AP courses, Marcy was motivated by the AP environment at her school and hoped other Latina/o/x students would aspire to take advantage of these courses as she did, regardless of how many other students in these courses did not share similar experiences of being first-generation and Latina/o/x. Students gained social and cultural capital to some degree because of their interactions in class. Lorena, a first-year student at UC Berkeley, said that “the only reason [she] knew to ask for four letters of recommendation at the end of junior year was because [she] heard other people talking about getting their letters of rec.” These kinds of interactions are not necessarily happening in schools or spaces that lack college-going cultures and when the dominant group is college-going.

By contrast to the mixed experiences in advanced courses, most students spoke favorably about their interactions with their AVID teachers. As part of the school’s resources, AVID is an elective course available at all three of the high schools that students attended that helps first-generation students prepare for four-year college eligibility and develop the skills needed for college success. The AVID curriculum includes academic instruction, tutoring, and motivational exercises that will inspire students to prepare for college. Most students participate in AVID throughout their high school years while taking college preparatory curriculum (Sequoia Union High School District, 2022).

Resources like AVID created a sense of belonging for students because they provided an environment where students had shared identities and experiences that created a smaller community on campus. The first-generation identity was pronounced in AVID. All students were interviewed but two formed part of the AVID programs at their school. In the program, students felt understood and empathized with each other’s challenges. Sarah, a current UC Berkeley student, vividly described her feelings during her senior year in AVID,

In AVID it's like we saw each other more and we were all going through the same thing. We were all first-gen, and we come from very similar families. So it's like we're all learning from each other. We all literally have our parents who didn't go to college. So it's like we're going through the same thing.

This description varies from the descriptions of environments from other classrooms, particularly around how centered their first-generation experience was. They felt great empowerment and comfort in knowing there were other students who faced similar challenges at school and at home. Angela, a student at Cañada Community College, says, “I feel like having the community of AVID, like my AVID class, they have the same goals as me and have similar backgrounds to me. I feel like having that community there really helped me.” The welcoming space cultivated in AVID increased students’ comfort and like some of their other classes, influenced their college-going behaviors and their college choice as students shared their college list and shared about their own process to provide further guidance or support to their peers.

In AVID classrooms, college encouragement came from peers and from the teachers that expressed their confidence in students’ ability to succeed in college. Encouragement from AVID teachers came through words of affirmation or through specific actions during the various stages of the college choice process. AVID teachers’ support ranged from helping students with various portions of their college applications during their senior year to directing students to other resources on campus that could support their college-going efforts, including encouraging students to take advanced courses. When asking Jessica, a second-year student at Chapman University, about who took a special interest at school in supporting her, she said, “I would definitely say my AVID teacher, Miss V. She's great. I felt like if I ever had any questions, I could always go to her.” Similarly, Angela, a current first-year student at Cañada Community

College who was also part of AVID from another high school, reported receiving ample support from her AVID teacher,

My AVID teacher was super supportive. I had her for the whole four years. And she really knew my story. And she knew what I would go through, not just with my immigration status, but also at home with my family. So I think she gave a lot of support. And she always offered extra office hours when I needed them.

Angela had a sustained relationship with her AVID teacher and was reassured her teacher knew her really well personally. Jessica also recalls the close relationship with her AVID teacher and when asked who most supported her at school she said, “I would say definitely, my AVID teacher. She's great. I felt like if I ever had any questions, I can always go to her.” She further elaborated on AVID’s impact on her process,

I joined AVID my junior year of high school and that really made things a lot clearer for me just because being first-gen I didn't know how the application process works. I didn't even know what FAFSA was. So AVID definitely prepared me for that and provided me with resources.

Although Jessica joined AVID a bit later than other students, she was still better equipped and informed on the college process thanks to joining the program. She was also able to establish a close relationship with her AVID teacher in a short period just in time to leverage her support during her senior year. Like Angela and Jessica, all AVID students felt a strong bond with their AVID teachers and they were the adults most talked about when asked who supported them on campus with their college process. Students talked about how approachable their AVID teachers were and how much they knew them individually. Students took this encouragement very

personally and it built the necessary trust to encourage students to ask more questions and seek the support needed to navigate their college process.

Contrasting with the larger campus environment, AVID created a welcoming space that became the main source of support for students at school helped them navigate the college process, and provided college exposure, and individual caring relationships. AVID teachers effectively understood that supporting first-generation students with the college process required having a deep understanding of their individual context and college preferences. As such, AVID provided college visits that exposed students to different college options and where they had individual time with their AVID teachers to build trusting relationships. Marcy describes her own relationship with her AVID teacher, “Miss V. definitely knew what I wanted. So she was able to support me through the whole college process. I remember her sitting with me, and looking at schools. I knew I had a support system.” Marcy, much like other AVID students, was able to lean on her teacher to ask questions, discuss her college options, and feel confident that she had quality support to pursue college. As such, AVID played a role in influencing students' college options based on the options they received exposure to and the ways they prepared for those options. While students struggled with the larger school climate, those who were in AVID, appreciated the climate in AVID that was conducive to helping them pursue their college goals.

The benefits of AVID extended beyond the class period as this space provided other supports for navigating the college process. In AVID, students learned about other on and off-campus resources that could support them with their college process like Boys & Girls Clubs (BGCP). The first time Selena, a third-year student currently attending Stanford University, learned about BGCP was in her AVID class, which provided her with support outside of the regular class time. She said



They would bring in Boys and Girls Club to talk about the services they offer. They provide a lot of resources, but also like a safe place for me to come eat my lunch and just hang out there. Like if I didn't have a class I would talk to my AVID teacher. And so it was AVID that gave the constant support.

Selena leveraged the AVID space beyond her class time to be a safe space where she could do what she needed daily. She also spent more time building a relationship with her AVID teacher in the AVID space where she felt comfortable doing so. The frequency of conversations and time spent in the AVID classroom allowed Selena to feel consistent support. She also associated AVID support with the introduction to BGCP and the additional support she gained to navigate the college process as a result of this introduction. Similarly, Lorena talked about the need to have multiple programs to help her navigate the college process. She mentioned how she learned about BGCP's Future Grads program through AVID, "I had AVID to gain knowledge over the college systems and it kind of pushed me to really think about what I wanted in a college, and they helped connect me with Future Grads." Lorena valued being part of AVID because of the knowledge and connections she gained, like the mentors she met that were critical to her college choice process. Sarah, another first-year student from UC Berkeley, also named the importance of AVID and how critical it was at her high school for first-generation students,

I feel like if it wasn't for AVID, my high school would not have helped me. I didn't feel supported in my IB classes. The teachers were always like, 'Oh, come in and ask questions.' But in class, it's like I didn't have the community, it was just very separated...you have to be part of AVID, you have to go to the College and Career Center on your own, which can be a lot with everything that you're already doing. So I feel like if it weren't for AVID, [my high school] wouldn't really have prepared me.

Sarah most valued the community and support for the college process that AVID provided. She contrasted her experiences in AVID and her IB classes. She didn't have relationships with her IB teachers and peers the way she did with her AVID teacher and peers. This left her feeling like she didn't have a community in those classes.

In addition to the emotional support, students felt from their AVID peers and from their AVID teacher, students also reported learning much of the college knowledge they knew thanks to AVID. Students described this information as more generalized college information that did not necessarily always consider their individual context but provided a jumpstart to their college process. Selena who applied to several different colleges during her senior year says that AVID was probably the most valuable resource her high school provided to help her navigate the college process,

It was AVID introducing all of those deadlines and things that I had to keep in mind like applying to the California Dream Act and any scholarships that were available. So the most useful thing was AVID which literally gave me a step-by-step into how college applications work.”

Like Selena, Angela named AVID as one of her main supports, “the main help [was] AVID, Future Grads, and the College and Career Center. Those were the people that were guiding me.” Programs like AVID were important to many of these first-generation Latina/o/x students who needed other sources of information and opportunities to gain college knowledge as they could not rely on their families or private means to get this information as several of them reported their peers had. While students were attending well-resourced schools that provided various resources to support college-going efforts—it did not mean students were inclined to leverage these resources, either because they did not know how to or they did not feel enough comfort in

accessing them. Students mainly reported leveraging advanced courses and AVID as the primary supports for navigating the college process. However, AVID was the main source for being able to support students with both—navigating the college process and the high school’s unwelcoming climate.

### **College-Going Support in a Community Organization**

As a community-based organization, BGCP provides extended learning programs for students ranging from kindergarten to college at school sites and clubhouses. Future Grads is BGCP’s college success program that all students participated in while in high school. Future Grads helps students to and through college by providing the guidance students need for college eligibility and the support to complete the college application and financial aid processes. Once students enter college, they continue to receive the guidance and support to complete their four-year degree. Students in Future Grads may choose to enroll in a four-year institution after high school graduation or to enroll in community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution. The program accepts students at the beginning of their sophomore year of high school and meets with students’ families regularly throughout their time in the program.

BGCP became a source of social and cultural capital for students based on the cultural knowledge and information provided to students and families about college that supported their college-going efforts. BGCP was accessible during after-school hours on campus, and physically in the students' community. Students' participation in BGCP’s college success program, Future Grads, provided them another opportunity to build community among other first-generation students, learn how to leverage the resources available at their school to support their college-going efforts, and receive additional individualized, hands-on college support. BGCP became a space for students to move between the *Nepantla*, *El Compromiso*, and *Coyolxauhqui* stages of

the *college-conocimiento* pathway, while mitigating the *Clash of Realities*, especially around their families expectations. They were also able to strengthen their *Spiritual Activism* to advocate for their own needs and receive support from their peers. BGCP's involvement in a student's college choice process varied by how much they leveraged the program's resources to complement their independent work or how much they needed the program to navigate their process to make a college choice.

Since most students participated in the AVID program at their school, BGCP served as an extension to continue to build a community outside of the school day with first-generation peers to create a welcoming college-going climate. In some ways, the environment mirrored AVID. The environment was one of first-generation peers who shared a sense of camaraderie while navigating the college application process. Students had a strong sense of belonging that contrasted with their sentiments about the overall climate at their schools. This proved especially critical for the one first-generation student who was not a part of AVID due to limitations in their schedule. Angela described the BGCP environment in the following way,

Future Grads have meetings in school, that's where I met [BGCP staff member] and more people because not everyone had space in their schedule to have AVID because they have to take extra classes or [have] extra support [classes]. But Future Grads was there to connect me to even more people in my own school and create another community for me to feel safe and comfortable.

Like AVID, BGCP's Future Grads program created a safe space where students could feel supported and build community with other first-generation students who had shared identities and experiences related to navigating the college process. Regardless of students' experiences at school, students reported feeling safe in this space where they felt they belonged through

BGCP's program. Veronica, a first-year at De Anza Community College, expressed, "I felt like I had a community in which I belonged and that they would always be there for me to always support me." The BGCP space was especially important because it provided extended hours after-school where students could receive the emotional support and guidance as they navigated the college process. Most students valued this because it was not something readily available at home.

Unlike AVID, however, students referenced BGCP Future Grads staff as mentors who could understand their experience as first-generation students because they too, were first-generation and identified as Latina/o/x. Due to shared experiences, there seemed to be quick rapport-building that facilitated trusting relationships between students and program staff. Tania, a first-year from De Anza Community College, specifically said, "You guys were like my big brother and sister, where I always thought I could look up to you guys. I felt very much comfortable because you guys knew what we're going through. You guys know how we feel." Students felt deeply understood and comforted by having BGCP team members who had similar feelings and experiences with discomfort and feeling like outsiders at their own high school campuses. Sarah, a first-year at UC Berkeley, further emphasized how helpful it was that staff members and students shared the first-generation identity. She said, "The program itself, it helped us knowing that [staff] were once or like you all were once in our shoes." Aside from the guidance with the college process, students looked up to BGCP team members who they saw as role models and felt inspired to see what could be possible, especially when they did not have an older sibling or someone close to them who had successfully pursued college.

The effectiveness of creating a supportive college-going climate through BGCP's program was centering the first-generation identity which contrasted with how students

expressed experiencing classes outside of AVID at their school. Centering the first-generation identity was reflected in the program's activities ranging from college tours and how staff members held meetings with families to explain the financial aid process. Isaac, a first-year at California Baptist University who was not in AVID, described the first time he met BGCP team members,

Representation is so important, because seeing the staff that graduated from Santa Clara, I was like, 'Wow, these are people that are like me, that did all of this. And I can do that too.' You know, and that was emphasized through the program that no matter who you were, your background, you can do this, and it's not impossible. College is here for you to go to.

Since students felt like the minority at their school, there was comfort in being surrounded by individuals who could understand much more deeply than others at school because of several shared identities. Isaac mentioned the need for representation because his private college, similar to his high school, is not made up of adults who look like him and share his Latino or first-generation identity. BGCP was one of the first times he met college-educated Latinos who held leadership positions, and he felt inspired that they looked like him and were so accomplished. He also felt like college was something he had a right to, which was slightly different messaging than what he got at his high school as one of the few students who was assigned to support classes while in high school. This important message was critical for all students, especially since their desire to go to college varied in the degree to which they felt it was a given or something that was going to be dependent on other factors. Considering the varying context behind each student's circumstances and college goals, BGCP's college-going environment provided different levels of support.

Working on specific college applications encompassed a large portion of the college-going support that students needed to navigate the college process. Within BGCP, students received hands-on support with different components of the college applications like personal statement coaching and guidance on filling out financial aid forms. Sarah, a first-year from UC Berkeley, contrasts her experience in BGCP's program and AVID at her school. She distinguished the different kinds of support she received,

Whenever I have a question they're always like, 'Oh, let's set up a meeting.' It's very individualized. That's what helped me the most, their willingness to help you out and not so much in a group setting, if that makes sense. Because other programs, like AVID, we're in a huge class and we can't get individual answers to questions.

Sarah named the constraints of navigating the college process in a group setting and how much students needed the ability to ask individual questions to be able to apply the more general college knowledge to their own circumstances. The welcoming environment students experienced helped them leverage BGCP's team to access the support needed because they were inclined to ask the nuanced and detailed questions that would support their process. The trust built within the program also contributed to students' desire to further access BGCP's resources outside of their school. Some students spent physically more time at the BGCP location after school and had multi-year relationships with BGCP staff that contributed to the trust-building with the program. The questions and requests for support increased the more students and BGCP staff included parents in the process, as well as the volunteer mentors some students reported having strong relationships with. Financial aid conversations were the primary focus of most parent conversations and critical to college choice because they provided students and parents with more information about the benefits of their college options.

The individualized support students received often came from BGCP staff members or volunteer mentors they had been paired with through their participation in BGCP's program. The level of individualized support increased when students had a strong relationship with their mentor who often was a source of social capital that influenced students' college choice process. They increased the amount of time students received individual support which was valuable for the students who applied to private colleges. Jessica, a second-year at Chapman University, described her time with her volunteer mentor,

Future Grads was also a very big support system while I was applying for colleges. And so because of Future Grads, I was able to have a mentor. And that mentor really helped me. We would meet outside of school and work on my applications together. So she was a really big help. And so it was also personalized—it was one-on-one, which I think was very valuable because for example, in AVID it's a whole class, it was like 30 students and only one teacher, so it was a little bit hard to get the help that I needed at times. So thanks to Future Grads I knew that I had a mentor that I can always ask questions to.

The individual hands-on college application support helped students receive guidance on navigating applications and the ability to ask questions as needed. The volunteer mentors provided after-school time students could use to ask questions and work on college applications. Mentors provided the more frequent personalized time students used to navigate the college choice process. It was something that students reported needing but not necessarily receiving at school. The few times students mentioned a caring adult at their school, it was more focused on encouragement rather than hands-on, personalized support.

Aside from mentorship, the physical location of the Boys & Girls Club proved to be valuable to several students, especially as some students reported having less time on campus during



distance learning or needing a quiet space. Heather, a first-year student attending De Anza Community College mentioned, “the in-person application [support], that’s what helped me the most because I was in a space where it was quiet.” Some students, like Heather, needed a space outside of school and their homes to work on college applications. Even prior to the pandemic, Gaby, a third-year student attending San Jose State, mentioned how much time she spent at the clubhouse,

That [Future Grads] was my source of information and guidance. So other than what I was at home doing, I was mainly at the Boys and Girls Club. I was doing my college applications, and working on my personal insight questions. I would be drafting them at school or at the Club, and having them reviewed at the Club and brainstorming. I remember towards the end of the window for submitting those, I was at the Boys and Girls Club every evening...ironing out all the wrinkles on those essays was in the Boys and Girls Club. Then also, I remember I would go into M.'s office with J., I would go in there and do our financial aid and FAFSA stuff...literally, the whole process [was] in Boys and Girls Club and Future Grads.

The additional hours students like Gaby and Heather described spending at the Clubhouse allowed for individual hands-on support to help students navigate the college application process outside of school.

In addition to the navigational college-going support students reported as they navigated college and financial aid applications, there was consistently a layer of social and emotional support students felt from BGCP team members throughout their senior year. This support was more pronounced when students made decisions that were different than their original postsecondary education plan. BGCP staff members validated students' change of plans and

recognized the nonlinear college choice pathway. The staff proceeded to support the student's pursuit of the next stage on their pathway, whether that was creating an academic plan at a local community college or applying to transfer from a four-year institution to a community college. Angela, a first-year at Cañada Community College, described the positive message she received as she transferred from UC Merced after her first semester,

I feel like BGCP was really there in all my decisions. Even when I decided on UC Merced, they were still there. And then when I came back to Cañada, they were like, 'We can still help you. We're still here for you. And you can talk to us about it. We want to know what's going on.' I feel like BGCP has been really supportive not only in helping me learn about college and helping me learn what to do in college, but also emotionally. I feel like I see BGCP and Future Grads mentors, not only as mentors but also like a friend that I can trust.

As first-generation, Latina/o/x students who did not have families who understood fully the process students underwent, students greatly benefitted from social and emotional support provided by BGCP's staff. The encouragement and trusting relationships between students and BGCP staff allowed for the social and emotional support to be embedded in the college-going support staff provided to students through college and financial aid applications or through the detailed conversations staff members facilitated between students and families. This was especially important for the few students who had a nonlinear trajectory like Angela's that was misunderstood by families or by their schools.

The individualized support BGCP provided was the most distinguished and named factor students reported as most supporting their college choice process because it considered their individual context. The individualized support provided students with: help making a college

decision in partnership with their family, guidance on applying to college and focusing on different aspects of the college application, and being paired one-on-one with a mentor that increased the individualized and personalized support students received. Students received support with making a college decision after discussing with caregivers and helping families learn about the various college pathways, especially those less discussed in schools like community colleges. As a community college student, Veronica, a first-year at De Anza Community College, described the conversation between her father and her BGCP mentor during her college-decision making process as she weighed the financial impact of her college options. She says

I remember my dad asked, ‘What do you recommend for my daughter? Do you recommend community college or going to San Diego?’ and [BGCP mentor] said, ‘I say, she goes to community college, she thrives at M-A, she's going to thrive at community college too.’

Although Veronica was confident in her decision to go to community college, she leaned on her BGCP mentor to help her explain her college choice to her family, especially since it went against what they believed to be an indicator of success. Veronica’s parents, especially her father who was the only parent from the study that went to high school in the U.S., believed that a four-year institution was a better college option. Unlike most of the other students and their families, distance from home was not an issue for Veronica’s parents. They were grappling with the cost of attendance for the University of San Diego, a private four-year institution. The individual meeting BGCP held with Veronica and her family was in support of Veronica’s college choice and required a great level of individual context.

A couple of the community college students expressed feeling similar support from BGCP that helped them feel successful about their college choice—this was especially important as most community college students opted for this pathway over the four-year institutions they were admitted to because of financial reasons. Angela who was apprehensive about her decision to go to community college described the unconditional support she felt through BGCP,

Future Grads celebrated every accomplishment that I made. Even though it wasn't my best work. And I feel that's a lot of support. That's a support that every student should have, to feel like they're doing great no matter what path they're in, and it helped me to not really compare myself to other students, which can be really stressful.

Angela was reminded that her college process was individual, and she was able to receive this personalized messaging because BGCP accounted for her college preferences, goals, and circumstances. The individual college navigation support was personalized and helped first-generation students acquire the necessary social and cultural capital to pursue their college choice. Like Angela, Tania, a first-year at De Anza Community College, also expressed validation for her choice from BGCP which was meaningful because she knew how much stigma was associated with community college, and her participation in another program only focused on supporting her with pursuing four-year institutions. She said,

Although I didn't really know as much about community college because my other program was focused on putting students in four-years. I feel like Future Grads, you guys were like, 'it's okay to pick community college. There's nothing wrong with that.' In my other program, it was [only] four-years because that's their motto. I'm like, 'why would I go to a four-year if I'm not really happy in it?' I really like how Future Grads was like,

‘it's your pick, your future. You know what's best for you. There's always community college.’ And everything said, that's what I really liked.

Reminding Tania that she had options and it was her choice to pick what she wanted was the kind of support she recalled was important in her decision-making process, especially since it was not the message she received through her other college-support program.

BGCP also supported students attending four-year institutions during their decision-making process that influenced their college choice. Similar to the community college students, BGCP staff met with students and their families to provide guidance on how to read financial aid packages. Sarah, a first-year at UC Berkeley, recalled her decision-making process,

When it came to actually deciding, we had meetings. I remember, I met with [a staff member] a few times, and we went over financial aid packages, which is really important. My dad would ask me about this and college is expensive so that helped me a lot in making my decision.

Being concerned with the cost of college, Sarah states that the meetings she had with BGCP staff helped her understand and explain the finances to her dad, which supported her to make a college choice. Jessica, a second-year at Chapman, also expressed, “I feel having that support system from those programs, and definitely thinking about the finances was the main thing that helped me decide where I'm at.” These individual meetings were important because sometimes they lead to BGCP staff facilitating conversations between students and their parents, other times it was simply equipping the family with the information to make a decision, or providing the student with more information to help them make a college choice. Through individual meetings that mostly focused on financial aid, BGCP staff provided the social and cultural capital students used to make their college choice.

## Summary

This chapter provided the findings from the study conducted to understand how Latina/o/x students' access to social and cultural capital influenced their college choice process in a well-resourced high school environment and in their community. Three themes emerged that focused on the influence of the students' familial cultural capital, their navigation of resources on their school campus, and the college-going support they received through a community organization. Students' familial cultural capital influenced their motivation for why they wanted to pursue college as students recognized the privilege they held by being able to pursue higher education. Families also influenced students' college choice process by where they applied and how they perceived their options when it was time to make a college choice. Distance from home, financial aid, and cultural norms were factors students considered when making their choice based on how they thought their choice would benefit their family.

Students also navigated the complex school environments they were in that provided college-going resources in unwelcoming school climates. While beneficial academically, advanced classes were often the source of discomfort and othering because most students didn't feel like they belonged. Most students found college-going support on campus through their AVID program which provided supportive teachers and peers. It also allowed students to access further the college-going resources at their schools, including the community organization that they met through school. Through the community organization students were able to apply the college knowledge from school to their individual circumstances. The community organization leveraged individual meetings, mentors, and family conversations to aid students during their college application and decision-making processes. This was most often facilitated by program staff who, like the students, identified as Latina/o/x and were first-generation. Students were able

to access the social and cultural capital in their schools and in their communities. Families, schools, and the community organization all influenced their college choice process based on where they chose to apply and how they leveraged their capital to get the necessary information to make a college choice.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

As a state with one of the largest Latina/o/x populations in the U.S., California continues to have some of the lowest college degree attainment rates among Latina/o/x students. Enrollment levels of Latina/o/x students in higher education institutions further reflect this disproportionality, especially among institutions with higher degree completion rates. Individual, school, and environmental contexts influence the requisite social and cultural capital that enhances first-generation Latina/o/x students' college enrollment. While substantial research on college choice for first-generation Latina/o/x students has taken place in urban environments, few environments center the experiences of these students in diverse socioeconomic high schools and communities, where access to social and cultural capital is presumably more readily available. As such, this study focused on understanding how first-generation Latina/o/x students, who attended well-resourced high schools, accessed social and cultural capital through their high school and community to influence their college choice process. The following questions guided this study: How do first-generation Latina/o/x students who attended well-resourced public high schools access social and cultural capital through their school and community settings? And in what ways did the social and cultural capital they accessed through school and community settings influence their college choice process?

Utilizing qualitative methodology, 12 college students, who attended three high schools from the same well-resourced high school district located in the Peninsula were interviewed. As a well-resourced high school district, it spends \$20,000 per pupil, about \$8,000 more than the national average and 37% of the student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch (California Department of Education, 2020; Niche, 2021). In addition to attending the same high



school district, students were participants of BGCP's college success program, a partner program to the high school district. BGCP's membership program data on graduating seniors between 2019 and 2021 was used for participant recruitment. Interested students were asked to complete a pre-interview survey to establish their first-generation and Latina/o/x identity and confirm their high school and college enrollment. Eligible students participated in semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, students were asked to reflect on their schooling, community, and personal experiences during their high school years to understand how these experiences influenced their college choice.

This chapter will discuss the key findings for each research question based on the 12 interviews conducted. The key findings for the first question will discuss the ways the school's habitus, BGCP program participation, and students' families provided social and cultural capital. Key findings for the second question will discuss how their gained capital influenced their college-choice process. Following the discussion of each research question's findings, the chapter will discuss the implications for practice for public high schools, higher education institutions, and community-based organizations. Lastly, the chapter will discuss the implications for research that can grow the understanding of first-generation Latina/o/x high school students' college choice experiences in diverse socioeconomic environments, and the role community organizations can have in supporting college-going efforts.

**Research Question 1: How do first-generation Latina/o/x students who attend well-resourced public high schools access social and cultural capital through their school and community settings?**

Students' experiences in advanced placement classes, the AVID program, and as they engaged with other on-campus resources illustrated how these first-generation Latina/o/x

students accessed social and cultural capital at their respective high schools. Students recognized the value of advanced courses and how they could prepare them for the academic rigor they expected in college. Selena, a third-year student attending Stanford University, specifically alluded to the academic preparation she gained from participating in the advanced courses through the IB diploma offered at her high school. She credited the IB coursework for her academic confidence when she started at Stanford University. Since students already saw themselves as college-going, their school's habitus reinforced the need for them to take advanced classes, even when they felt uncomfortable in those classes. These students knew they needed to build their academic resilience as Conley (2007) discusses is critical to navigating college-level academics.

In addition to advanced classes, students also recognized the value of the AVID program and other extracurricular programs that made up the school's habitus that also provided them with social and cultural capital. Marcy, a first-year at Northeastern University, shared her experience as an AVID student and as a lacrosse team member. She explained how the coupling of the two resources helped her expand her college list and apply to a variety of colleges, including Northeastern which she had not heard of before her conversations with her teammates and AVID teacher. Veronica, a second-year student from De Anza community college, also alluded to AVID and the many student clubs on campus that she had access to and through which she was able to form meaningful relationships with teachers and peers that were critical to her college-going efforts. These findings reaffirm McDonough's (1997) notion of organizational and school habitus that norm college-going behaviors. College-going supports like AVID and advanced courses that students engaged in and through which they gained social and cultural

capital were ways the organizational and school habitus influenced students' college choice process.

The access to social and cultural capital that students gained through teachers and their peers further underscores the importance of institutional agents such as teachers, counselors, and middle-class peers that provide access to resources and opportunities to aid in college-going efforts (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Students who were able to develop trusting relationships with teachers and peers at their school gained capital. At the same time, for other students, particularly in advanced classes, the classroom climate limited students' ability to develop trusting relationships with peers and teachers. In these situations, students were not able to fully leverage the capital in their advanced classes. Sarah, a current first-year student at UC Berkeley, and Tania, a first-year attending De Anza Community College, both mention discomfort. Sarah, even mentioned staying quiet during her advanced classes because, like Tania, she felt her peers doubted her academic ability. These uncomfortable situations seemed frequent for students and led them to feel like they didn't belong in these classes, affirming Stanton-Salazar's (1997) notion that there are limitations to working class students fully building trusting relationships with institutional agents.

However, AVID was the one program where, all students who participated, named being able to cultivate trusting relationships with peers and teachers. While high school counselors may have previously been the primary source of college information, they are no longer the gatekeepers, nor the only institutional agents of college information (Holland, 2015; Roska & Robinson, 2016). The emergence of programs like AVID targeting first-generation students made it a valuable school resource that was most cited as helpful for college-going support

among students interviewed. AVID allowed teachers to focus on providing college knowledge without competing with other topics that often keep teachers from providing college knowledge (Achinstein et al., 2015). Most students interviewed talked about their caring AVID teacher who knew them personally and they felt they could easily talk about their college aspirations affirming previous research that caring adults at school contribute to students having greater success (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006). The types of interactions students had with their AVID teachers were described as caring and supportive while the few who spoke about interactions with counselors were transactional and focused on course scheduling. The trusting relationships students formed in AVID, however, allowed students to connect more personally and gain social and cultural capital to support their college process. Some students talked about the general college information they were appreciative of learning through AVID and the social capital they gained through the connections AVID provided, such as BGCP's college success program that they learned about in AVID. Some students even associated BGCP's program as one of the school's resources because of where they gained the connection.

Additionally, BGCP's college success program provided students with an opportunity to build trusting relationships with peers and mentors in a community setting. Cipollone and Stich (2017) discuss the ability that community-based programs have to most effectively serve first-generation Latina/o/x students because programs like BGCP's centered students' first-generation and Latina/o/x identities. BGCP provided college support that extended beyond the school day and through mentors that shared similar experiences with students. Isaac, a second-year student at California Baptist University, and Sarah, a first-year at UC Berkeley, mentioned being inspired by the BGCP mentors because they had gone to schools each aspired to apply to and they were also first-generation and Latina/o/x. These findings further confirm the critical role of

mentorship for first-generation students, especially when students can see themselves in role models (Dyce et al., 2013), which was unique in how students discussed the adults in BGCP compared to the teachers and adults at their schools. Another way the BGCP program centered students' identities was by involving students' families through the college process. Dyce et al. (2013) discuss the importance of familial involvement in students' college process which proved to be true among all students in the study. Familial capital influenced students' processes through the kinds of decisions students made about where to apply and where to enroll. BGCP's program provided opportunities for families to increase their involvement in the college choice process and support students explain their choices to their families.

The familial support most students discussed reaffirmed the first layer in Perna's (2006) college choice model that assumes students pursue higher education because they understand the long-term benefits, including the social mobility they can gain with a college degree. Most students talked about the early conversations parents had with them, even before high school, about why they needed to take advantage of the educational opportunities they had access to. This seemed to be at the forefront for students when sharing why they persisted in high school despite the challenges they faced due to their school's climate or for being the first in their family to pursue college.

**Research Question 2: In what ways does the social and cultural capital they access through school and community settings influence their college choice process?**

The social and cultural capital that students accessed at school through engaging with peers and teachers in advanced courses and in AVID influenced their college choice process. It led students to carry out college-going behaviors. These patterns align with previous research as McDonough (1997) and Gonzalez et al. (2003) discuss the learned behaviors students gain

because of their educational environments and trusting relationships with peers and institutional agents. Selena, Lorena, Jessica, and Marcy—all students currently attending four-year institutions, discussed specific actions they took to help their college process because of something they heard or learned from others in their advanced classes or in AVID. Lorena, a first-year at UC Berkeley, said she only knew to start asking teachers for recommendation letters during her junior year after hearing some of her peers discuss it in one of her IB classes.

In addition, the AVID program is where most students reported feeling a sense of belonging and were provided exposure to college options and personalized support for applying to colleges. This resource provided social and cultural capital at the students' schools and most influenced students' college choice process. Previous studies by Acevedo (2020) have looked at the conditions most supportive of college-going efforts for first-generation Latina/o/x students and how much they will thrive when their identities inform the supportive structures in place. AVID was the school program that created a smaller community within the larger high school campus that centered first-generation students' identity by ensuring there were college exposure opportunities and college information giving that was not provided outside the AVID class through other school structures. AVID teachers provided encouragement and connected students to resources that could additionally help them with their college-going efforts outside of AVID. Teachers who students felt took a special interest in them became information sources (Liou et al., 2009). Through casual conversations outside of class, teachers provided social capital that influenced students' college-going process. Selena, a third-year student attending Stanford University, shared her experience with her AVID teacher and the time she would spend during lunch in her AVID classroom speaking with her teacher and being encouraged by them to pursue other college-going resources whether they were scholarships or programs like BGCP's. The

connection to additional social and cultural capital that could support students' college process beyond their AVID class time and complement it was a key role some teachers played, most of which students shared, were their AVID teachers. As Dyce et. al (2013) discusses, teachers wanted to direct students to the kinds of support that could best serve the needs of first-generation Latina/o/x students recognizing that they had unique needs compared to their more affluent peers.

Beyond the social and cultural capital that students accessed at school, students also accessed capital in their community through their immediate families and their participation in BGCP's college success program that influenced their college choice. Acevedo-Gil's (2017) *college-conocimiento* best captures the nonlinear college choice process several students experienced after deciding they wanted to go to college and started at the first stage *El Arrebato*, which for many, took place before they started high school and before joining BGCP's college success program. Families influenced why students chose to pursue college and where students applied to college based on the distance from home and the family's financial reality. When students talked about why they wanted to pursue college, they alluded to their families and desire to leverage the opportunities they had access to because of living in California and attending the high schools they did. While most students reflected on the fourth stage of *El Compromiso* along the *college-conocimiento* (Acevedo-Gil, 2017) college choice process during their interview, which refers to when students are planning for and applying to college, they consistently shared that pursuing college was rooted in their desire to honor their families' sacrifices and make their communities proud. Pursuing college was associated with a higher purpose that extended beyond the direct benefits they would gain. Where most students chose to apply and ultimately enroll was heavily influenced by what they perceived to be an acceptable distance and would not

burden their family financially. Community college students, in particular, moved back and forth through Acevedo-Gil's *college-conocimiento*'s (2017) fifth stage, *Coyolxauhqui* when students are choosing a college, and second stage, *Nepantla* when students are initially searching for college information, as they considered community college options in light of their financial reality affirming the nonlinear college choice process several first-generation Latina/o/x students have. Kim and Nuñez (2013) discuss how Latina/o/x students with lower SES need to reconsider college options due to financial feasibility the way Tania, Veronica, and Sam, some of the community college student participants, discussed in their interviews.

BGCP's college success program further influenced students' college choice process through the additional college-going support and exposure they provided students. Like AVID, students gained additional social and cultural capital from other first-generation peers and adults who made up the program that created a sense of belonging. BGCP was able to mentor and nurture students' college aspirations as Berguson (2009) discussed as being critical for first-generation students. As a community-based organization, students named being able to spend more time after the school day engaging with BGCP mentors and having a place to work outside of their house. Selena and Gaby, both attending four-year institutions, talked about frequenting the BGCP Clubhouse daily to work on college applications and to meet with their mentors. The individual support in applying to colleges and additional support with the decision-making process were the most named aspects of BGCP's program that most students discussed when asked about what was most supportive and influenced their college choice process. The individual support was critical for students to be able to apply the more general college information to their context. They saw their AVID class time as a good resource to get general information that they would use to inform how they spent their time at BGCP's program with their mentors. This



bridging of college information to students' individual circumstances was where BGCP most influenced students' college process, especially during distance learning when students were not spending ample time with their AVID class on campus. Heather, a first-year student attending De Anza community college, talked about attending the Clubhouse during distance learning. She talked about the need for a quiet space to work on college applications outside of her home. The individual context and hands-on support were also critical for students who wanted guidance with personal statements and with financial aid forms. Gaby, a third-year at San Jose State, talked about how the bulk of her college application process work took place at the Clubhouse.

The second most named aspect of BGCP that students named helpful was the support they received with the decision-making process, especially for students who participated in AVID and other college programs that focused primarily on helping students attend four-year institutions. Tania, a first-year student attending De Anza community college, and Angela, a first-year student attending Cañada community college, were both part of other college preparation programs. Each discussed the social and cultural capital BGCP provided that aided their decision-making process and was different from the messaging they received from other programs where they felt pressured to pursue four-year colleges without discussing community college options. They both said that BGCP was the only program that took time to explain the benefits of community college based on their individual circumstances. Like Tania and Angela, Veronica, a second-year attending De Anza community college, also described the support she received through BGCP in the decision-making process during the *Coyolxauhqui* stage of *college-conocimiento* (Acevedo-Gil, 2017) when deciding where to enroll and how to explain community college to her family.

## **Implications for Practice**

The findings highlight the important role that programs and services, that prioritize the unique needs of first-generation Latina/o/x students, play in students' college choice process. Programs like AVID and BGCP's that target first-generation students provide college exposure, college-going information, and support that may not be readily available in well-resourced high schools where there is great income disparity, and most of the student body may rely on their own sources of social and cultural capital outside of school to navigate the college process. Thus, there is a need to establish and fund AVID-like programs and community-based program partnerships that can holistically provide college-going information and support to first-generation students, who may not already have sources of information and support elsewhere. The AVID program can provide college-going information widely among the student body, regardless of the pathway students take because its embedded in the school day. It can also serve as an ongoing, community-building, safe space for students who may be navigating a larger, unwelcoming campus climate. AVID can be an equitable way for well-resourced high schools to better serve their first-generation students.

Beyond AVID, high schools should also consider organizing students in small cohorts that are organized around advanced coursework. A small cohort structure could provide a supportive network of peers that can help first-generation students navigate the academic rigor and classroom dynamics that may feel unwelcoming. It could be a way to replicate the kind of welcoming dynamics students reported in AVID and could encourage more first-generation students to take advantage of the academic resources offered at their school.

In addition, high school districts should also consider offering orientations that target first-generation students during middle school before students start high school. These sessions

would orient and onboard students and their families on college-going information, such as the various college systems, the differences between college eligibility and college competitiveness, financial aid, the sequencing of math and English courses, and review the academic and college resources available on-campus and in the community they can access for continual support while in high school. Orientations could also provide strategies to families on how they can continue involvement during their child's high school years. These orientations have the potential to increase family engagement by equipping families with the information that further supports their students' college choice process. Schools could also create programs or provide resources to parents that further build on their aspirational capital and share new forms of capital among Latina/o/x students and others on campus. This could reinforce this form of untapped capital that schools and their larger community have much to gain from.

Programs like BGCP's that provide mentorship and a continuum of services starting in high school and through postsecondary education can increase the individual support that first-generation Latina/o/x students benefit from when applying college-going information to their individual context. When programs, like BGCP's, have mentors who have experienced the college choice process as first-generation students themselves, it can allow for stronger rapport with students and their families. Boys and Girls Club, as a national organization usually located in lower SES communities, is positioned to partner with schools all over the country to implement a similar program that can establish college-going cultures in different environments. The programs can complement existing college-going cultures in well-resourced high schools like the ones in this study, or they can establish college-going cultures where they may not exist in students' schools already.

## **Implications for Research**

While this study sought to understand how first-generation Latina/o/x students navigated their college choice process while attending a well-resourced school, this becomes more nuanced if students are participating in college success programs. There is an opportunity to understand more broadly the experiences of first-generation students navigating well-resourced high schools that do not have established programs like AVID, nor partnerships like BGCP's as these were the main resources students consistently named around college choice in association with their school. In this study, there was only one student who was not a part of AVID, and his experience varied in how he viewed his high school resources. He was critical of his high school as he could not think of a significant resource that supported his college-going efforts. Similarly, there is an opportunity to understand the influences of students who attend community college and are not eligible for four-year institutions. All student participants in this study were eligible and applied to four-year institutions, regardless of where they ended up enrolling. Understanding further the experiences of community college students would help uncover more deeply their schooling experiences and the potential benefits of the community college pathway that only minimally surfaced in this study due to the lower number of community college student participants and their different contexts as four-year eligible students.

This study focused on students attending three different high schools within the same high school district, however, there is more research possible to more deeply understand the differences in college-going cultures and supports available at each campus that influences students' college choice process within the same high school district. Additionally, there is also more research needed to understand the role of community organizations, like BGCP, in first-generation students' college-going services, especially in locations like the Peninsula where there

are multiple providers with similar missions seeking to support first-generation students' access to higher education. Growing knowledge on how community organizations help drive high school and higher education outcomes would provide more insight into the valuable partnerships each may pursue to best serve first-generation and Latina/o/x students.

### **Conclusion**

The schooling experiences of the 12 first-generation Latina/o/x students who participated in this study highlight the ways social and cultural capital is accessed through the various layers of navigation that first-generation students must do to get to college, that may not be obvious when attending a well-resourced high school. The first layer is the daily navigation on campus that students may experience as unwelcoming due to the perceived academic doubt they may feel in advanced classes or due to knowledge others may assume students enter high school with. Regardless, the discomfort requires pushing through. The second layer of navigation is the college choice process and the ability to identify the needed resources at school or outside of school that will provide the guidance students need but is not available at home. Lastly, the third layer of navigation is the decision-making process and how students reconcile their college choice with themselves and their families. These complex layers of navigation illustrate the challenges of first-generation Latina/o/x students and the strong purpose and persistence needed to be college-going.

In examining first-generation Latina/o/x students' college choice process and how they are shaped by high school and community environments, the study demonstrates how school and community can best partner to help students navigate through these various layers and the college choice process. The student's experiences at school highlight the ways they experienced the socioeconomic diversity on campus that often led to discomfort and opportunity. However,

the opportunities that came from attending a well-resourced high school required a basic level of comfort and trust for students to fully leverage. The study identifies the importance of individualized college guidance, mentorship, and familial involvement as high-leverage strategies when supporting college-going efforts for first-generation Latina/o/x students. These strategies are strengthened by familial support and the existing capital students bring to their school and community settings from home. High school districts, colleges, and community-based organizations can change the enrollment levels of first-generation Latina/o/x students in higher education and thus, increase college attainment rates among this student population when recognizing the invaluable capital students bring to school and community partnerships.

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## APPENDIX A

### Pre-Interview Survey

#### First-Generation & Latina/o/x Identity

1. First & Last Name
2. Contact Information
3. Best format to conduct an interview
  - a. In-Person
  - b. Video Call
4. Do you identify as Latina, Latino, or Latinx?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. Did your parents/guardians attend college in the U.S.?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Did your parents/guardians earn a college degree in the U.S.?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

#### High School Information

1. High School Attended
  - a. High School A
  - b. High School B

- c. High School C
- 2. Did you graduate from high school during Spring 2021?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 3. Did you participate in BGCP's Future Grads program during your high school senior year?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

**College Information**

- 1. Did you receive two or more acceptances to colleges/universities during your senior year of high school?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 2. Please list all colleges/universities that you received an acceptance to.
- 3. Did you enroll in college the fall following your high school graduation?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 4. What type of college/university did you enroll in following high school graduation?
  - a. Community College
  - b. Four-Year College or University
- 5. Which college/university are you currently enrolled in?
  - a. Write in college name



b. Not enrolled

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Introduction**

1. Describe how you first learned about college.
2. How did your experiences as a first-generation Latina/o/x student influence your decision to go to college?
3. What did you consider when deciding whether you were going to go to college?

#### **School Influence**

1. Tell me about your high school experience and when you first started talking about college.
  - a. When was it?
  - b. Who did you talk to?
  - c. What did you discuss?
2. Tell me about an experience at your high school that truly supported you navigate the college process?
3. Do you feel any adult at your school took special interest in you?
  - a. How did they help you?
4. How did the activities that your school put on to help you get to college impact your ability to go to college?
5. How do you think your high school experiences as a first-generation Latina/o/x student compare to your classmates who are not first-generation Latina/o/x?

## **Community Influence**

1. Tell me about your experience in applying to college and what it looked like outside of school.
2. How did your friends' college decision-making experiences influence your own?
3. Describe how your family influenced your college process.
4. How did Future Grads support your college process?
  - a. What support was most valuable and helpful to your process?

## **College Choice**

1. Describe how you built your college list and where you received acceptances to.
2. Describe your college-decision process and how you decided to enroll into the college you did.
  - a. (if not mentioned) What this your top choice college? Why or Why not?
3. In thinking back to your senior year of high school, what was the most challenging in making a college decision?
4. Based on your challenge(s), what most helped you make a decision of where to enroll?