

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

The Postsecondary Experiences of Latinas from a Low-Income, Single-Sex Urban Catholic High School in Los Angeles, California

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92f166bv>

**Author**

Kinman, Grant

**Publication Date**

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Postsecondary Experiences of  
Latinas from a Low-Income, Single-Sex Urban  
Catholic High School in Los Angeles, California

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Grant Daniel Kinman

2022



## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Postsecondary Experiences of  
Latinas From a Low-Income, Single-Sex Urban  
Catholic High School in Los Angeles, California

by

Grant Daniel Kinman

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Co-Chair

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

Historically, low-income Catholic secondary schools have provided opportunities for underrepresented students to receive quality education and matriculate to community college and four-year universities. This trend continues today, yet for schools like one in this study who identify as college preparatory schools, what happens to students once they graduate is mostly a mystery. Adding to the mystery, large graduation data within systems, such as the University of California and the California Community Colleges, does not provide disaggregated data for “private school” students. However, if available, graduation data alone would not capture the range of experiences that mostly first-generation Students of Color from schools, such as the one in this study, experience in postsecondary education. As such, this study uses qualitative methods

to capture the lived experiences of participants. To do so, this study utilized a Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework that emphasized the various forms of cultural capital Students of Color possess. To understand this phenomenon with greater depth this study focused on one specific school site in Los Angeles, California that has a long history of serving Students of Color who come from low-income families. To narrow the focus of this study and to fit the demographic of the site, this study focused specifically on the lived experiences of Latinas.

For this qualitative study, fourteen participants were assembled to participate in three focus groups, which was followed by four interviews with select participants from the focus groups. The findings of this study confirm that of other CCW research who identify linguistic, aspirational, social, navigational, resistance, spiritual, and familial capital as essential assets that help Latinas navigate higher education. The study identifies the school site itself as a place of rich social and navigational capital transfer, and that participants gained significantly from positive relationships with adults on campus. Similarly, the *familia* established at the school site promoted aspirational, familial, and navigational capital for students who once in college sought out other Latinas on campus, clubs, adult mentors of Color, and multicultural groups and institutions to a large extent. Similarly, the spiritual formation of the school provided another form of capital, spiritual capital, that played an important role in helping participants overcome the challenges they experienced in college which ranged from culture shock and racial isolation to academic under preparedness in math and science and difficulty making friends with non-Latinas at mostly white college campuses.

The dissertation of Grant Daniel Kinman is approved.

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar

Véronica N. Vélez

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

## DEDICATION PAGE

For my students and their families who inspire me.

For the staff and good people at SJ.

For my family and friends who have supported me and encouraged me all along the way, not just in this endeavor, but in everything I do.

For my wife, you are my rock. You are my biggest fan and my greatest encourager *siempre*.

*Gracias mi amor.*

For my dissertation committee. It has been wonderful working with all of you.

And for my fellow researchers in the C27 Educational Leadership Program. It was honor working with all of you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION .....	ii-iii
DEDICATION .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi-x
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xii
VITA .....	xiii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Rationale	1
Introduction	3
Statement of the Problem	5
Background to the Problem	5
Limited Funding and Financial Capital	5
The Catholic School Option for Underrepresented Students	7
Catholic High Schools and Student Outcomes	8
Narrow Manifestation of the Problem	9
Existing Gaps in the Research	9
<i>Familismo</i> and Community Cultural Wealth	10
Statement of Purpose	11
Research Questions	12
Research Design	13
Significance of the Study	14
 Chapter 2: Literature Review	 15
Introduction	15
The Vast Differences Within “Private Schools”	15
Academic Preparedness and Cultural Identity	17
Latinx Education in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century: By the Numbers	18
Graduation Numbers: High School and Postsecondary	18
Ongoing Need for More Research	20
Why Choose to Pay for Catholic Education	20
The Shortcomings of Public Education	20
Segregated Schools and Unequal Resource Distribution	20
Student Tracking and the Achievement Gap	22
Standardized Testing and Stereotype Threat	23
K-12 Inequity Continued: College Counseling and College	24
Knowledge for Underrepresented Students in College	24
Which Students Benefit Most from College Counselors?	24
Mistrust Amongst Students of Color	25
Lacking College Knowledge: Who to Turn to?	25
Deeply Supportive but Lacking College Knowledge:	26
First-Generation Parent Misunderstandings	26
Equal Responsibility: K-12 and Higher Education	27
Catholic Education for Immigrant Families:	27
Hopes for a Brighter Future	27
Social Capital and Enrollment Opportunities	27
Brief History of Catholic Education	28
Catholic High Schools and Their Vitality	29
A Burden and a Need	30



A Strong Connection: The Catholic Tradition, <i>Familisimo</i> , and <i>La Frontera</i>	30
Catholic Social Teaching: A Brief Overview	30
The Dominican Tradition	31
Catholic Social Teaching and <i>Familisimo</i> Connections	33
Biculturalism: <i>La Frontera</i>	33
Single-Sex Catholic Schools and Identity Formation	34
Past and Present Evidence For and Against the Catholic School Advantage	35
What is the Catholic School Advantage?	35
Chicago Public and Catholic Schools Compared	36
Recent Catholic School Restructuring Considerations	38
The Need for More Catholic School Data and the Problem	38
With Higher Education “Private School” Data	
Changing Catholic School Demographics and Graduation Rates	38
A Higher Education “Private School” Data Vacuum	39
Data in the State of California	39
The Need for More Data	40
Another Challenge for Latinas in Education: The Problem	41
Of Dominant Social Capital Theories	
Dominant Culture Narrative Shaping	41
Refuting and Reshaping the Narrative	42
College Considerations: Where Latinas go to College and	43
Some Contributing Factors	
Choosing Public In-State Universities	43
Graduation Numbers for Latinx Students	44
The Advantage of Selective Universities	45
The Significance of Family	46
Not Attending Catholic Universities	46
Some Other Contributing Institutional and Cultural Factors	47
The Marginalized Majority	48
Where Catholic School Students go to School: A Summary	49
Reframing the Cultural Capital Conversation: Community	50
Cultural Wealth Programs and Their Success	
Successful Programs	50
The Dislocation of the Most Promising Students	51
Supporting First-Generation College Students	52
Conclusion	53
Chapter 3: Methods	54
Introduction	54
Research Questions	55
Research Design and Rationale	56
Methods	57
Site Selection and Overview	57
Access	59
Participant Recruitment	60
Data Collection Methods	62
Data Analysis Methods	64
Role Management and Positioning	66
Credibility and Trustworthiness	68
Ethical Issues	69
Limitations	70

Conclusion	71
Chapter 4: Findings	72
Overview	72
Findings	75
Introduction to Jasmine Aguilar’s Story	75
First-Generation and Continuing Generation Family	76
Support and Pressure for Latinas	
The Pandemic and Online Learning:	77
A Unique Window for First-Generation Parents	
Further Duality: The Pressure of Community	78
and the Support Network It Can Create	
Familial Capital: “Kinship Ties” as a	80
Means of Support and Community	
The Shortcomings of the High School	81
Science Curriculum and Its Impacts	
Under-preparedness in Both Math and	82
Science for Most Participants	
Social and Navigational Capital: Connecting with Women of Color	84
Self-Advocacy as a Means of Navigational Capital	85
Finding Her People: A New Counselor and <i>Hermanas Unidas</i>	86
Culture Shock and the Value of Social Capital:	87
Latinas Helping Latinas Navigate Postsecondary Education	
Samantha Jimenez	90
Introduction to Sam	90
¡Echale ganas! A Grandmother’s Powerful	91
Impact in Forming Aspirational Capital	
A Positive Overall High School Experience but Negative	92
Academic Outcomes	
A Lack of Academic Rigor Resulting in a Lack	93
Of College Preparedness	
Other Disadvantages Resulting from SJ’s Academic Tracking:	94
The College Counseling Program	
Exacerbating the Challenges: Going at Things Completely Alone	95
Racial Culture Shock on White Campuses:	96
A Community College and Four-Year University Reality	
The Development of Social and Navigational	98
Capital Through Mentorship	
Finding the Value of Seeking Help from Adults On-Campus	99
When Times Were Especially Hard: The Value of Spiritual Capital	101
Alejandra Rodriguez	103
Introduction to Ale	103
Unique Challenges for Undocumented Students in K-12	103
Starting Over at St. James and the Resulting Mixed Outcomes	104
Another Setback: Unprepared and Alone at CSLA	105
The Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Regardless of School Type	106
The Power of <i>Mutualistas</i> and Other Social Support	107
Systems When Dealing with Mental Health	
Not Talking with Parents: A Theme Amongst	108
First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Latinas	
What Happens When Students Do Talk to Their Parent(s):	109

Testimonios of Support and Latina Parent Understanding	110
Speaking to Her Mother: A Powerful Moment of Change that Resulted in Reestablishing Herself as a Student	111
The Transfer of Spiritual and Social Capital: From a Mother to a Daughter	112
Spiritual Capital: The Power of Church Community for Undocumented Students	114
Angie Ramirez	114
Introduction to Angie	115
Familial Capital: A Long Tradition of Catholic Education	116
Social Capital Derived from Opportunities at a Small Catholic High School	118
Choosing to Attend a Private Catholic College Far From Home	119
Familial and Navigational Capital: The Stories of Those Who Have Been There Before	120
A Marketing Major: Prepared and Under Prepared	120
Linguistic Capital: A Means of Social Connection and Professional Opportunity	122
Linguistic Capital as Social and Navigational Capital for Latinas	123
Being a “Proud Latina”: The Cultural Legacy of Families Who Choose to Send Their Daughters to Saint James	125
Defying the Numbers: Graduating from College at High Rates	126
Chapter 5: Discussion	127
Discussion of the Findings	127
Research Question One	127
Success Forming Adult Mentor Relationships in High School and College	128
Extracurricular Opportunities in Abundance: On-Campus Involvement with Student Clubs and Organizations	131
The Promotion and Fostering of Students’ Spiritual and Proud Latina Identity	133
Persistence and Graduation Rates	133
Research Question Two	133
Racial and Social Culture Shock Resulting from An Insular High School Experience	134
The Family-Community Pressure Dynamic and the Challenge of Talking to Parent(s)	136
Prepared in English but Underprepared in Math and Science	137
Negative Outcomes Resulting from Academic Tracking and Inadequate and Unequal College Counseling	139
Differences Between Community College and Four-Year University Participants	140
Research Questions Three	140
Social and Navigational Capital	142
Aspirational, Familial, and Spiritual Capital	145
Linguistic and Resistance Capital	147
Differences Between Community College and Four-Year University Participants	148
Limitations	149
Recommendations for the College Counseling Program	

Recommendations for Students' College Selection	150
Recommendations for the School Curriculum	152
Appendix A: Focus Group Study Introduction	154
Appendix B: Focus Group Questions Protocol	155
Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol (Amended Version)	158
Appendix D: Sample Student Interview Question Design	161
Appendix E: Email Invitation to Participants	164
Appendix F: Recommendations for the Math and Science Departments	165
Appendix G: Recommendations for the College Counseling Program	166
Appendix H: Recommendations for Students' College Selection	167
References	168

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Comparative Study of Two Los Angeles “Private Schools”	16
Table 2: Comparative Study of the Two Most and Least Selective UC Institutions	45
Table 3: 2021-2022 School Year College Matriculation Data for SJ	151

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Daniel Solórzano, Dr. Diane Durkin, Dr. Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, and Dr. Verónica Vélez. Each of you have been hugely supportive and encouraging of my work and its significance. A very special thanks to Dr. Durkin for her countless hours of editing and for her encouragement of me as a writer since the first year of ELP. I also would like to extend a huge thanks to Dr. Solórzano for his support in this project and for his support of my larger body of work and our community. Our conversations about Catholic Social Teaching and the importance of this study have inspired me and consistently reinforced how important it is.

I want to thank my family for all your support. I want to thank my mom and dad for encouraging me to pursue education and instilling in me values that align with Catholic Social Teaching which have afforded me the opportunities I have received. Thank you for never putting pressure on me to pursue money or status but instead pursue goodness and truth. I want to thank all my family for your encouragement all along the way and for coming and celebrating my graduation from ELP. That was a beautiful day! I want to thank my wife for her incredible and unrelenting support. You are my greatest fan and my love. Thank you for reading my work and reminding me that I am a researcher and a writer!

A huge thanks to my school community for their support in this endeavor. I want to thank the incredible group of friends I have been blessed with who encouraged me to pursue my doctorate and throughout the three years of the program.

Lastly, a huge thanks to my fellow C27 ELP cohort members. You have been my thought partners, my friends, and my inspiration in so many ways. And a huge thanks to the ELP professors, staff, and supporters. ELP is amazing because of all of you.

VITA OF GRANT D. KINMAN

2022

EDUCATION

B.A. History Western Washington University Bellingham, Washington	2009
Masters in Secondary Education Loyola Marymount University Westchester, California	2012
California Teaching Credential Los Angeles, California	2013
Doctor of Education Candidate University of California, Los Angeles	2019 - present

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Social Studies Teacher	2011- present
Vice Principal of Curriculum	2014 - present

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *Rationale*

When I began my career in Catholic education, I was green: underinformed about the practice of teaching generally but also about the rich historical tradition and mission of Catholic schools in the United States. To provide some context, before I began seriously considering the teaching profession, I was hopeful it might be my career path, yet unsure as to whether my future was truly in education. After receiving my bachelors degree in 2009, I worked in different fields for a year and upon further reflection decided to pursue teaching. In 2011, I was admitted to Loyola Marymount University's PLACE (Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education) Corps program and for the two years of the program I would teach history at a low-income, all girls Catholic high school in East Los Angeles. My intent was to get my teaching legs under me, get my degree, and make my way into public education where I would begin my career. I now have over a decade of teaching experience with the same Catholic school I began with, and I am beginning my eighth year teaching classes while working as the Vice Principal of Curriculum simultaneously.

My intentions changed as I was welcomed by the community and immersed within a school culture that truly lived out the Dominican tradition of study in the pursuit of *veritas* (truth) and the school's enduring mission to "serve the poor and the vulnerable." The school has been a beacon of hope as an affordable option for immigrant families for over a century. As communities of color—in particular black and brown communities—experience ongoing social and economic disparities resulting from systemic inequity in the United States, they need



advocates and opportunities. I saw in this unique community, advocacy and education that promoted the holistic development of students. Yet, it was more than that.

I learned that the idea of *familia* is not just a mantra of the school but that it permeates the school community and the amazing students, families, faculty, and parents that embraced me as *familia*. The school cherishes the rich Catholic tradition and the pillars of the Dominican faith which guide the school, while simultaneously valuing the rich cultural traditions and values of the students and their families. The cultural wealth of the school and the families is robust, yet many outsiders would look at it from a deficit perspective, noting what the school lacks in terms of social and economic capital compared to the dominant culture.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I utilize an assets-based approach, highlighting the cultural wealth of students from the school rather than focusing on what they lack compared to the dominant culture. In doing so, I to add to the existing literature that acknowledges that various forms of cultural wealth are assets to Latinas yet undervalued at postsecondary institutions who continually expect them to adapt rather than making institutional change. In highlighting the successes and challenges of students who go on and have a variety of experiences in higher education, I hope that this work will be a resource for the school and students who learn from the stories, perspectives, and experiences of those who go before them. In seeing themselves in these stories, I hope they too know that opportunities in postsecondary education exist for them and they will be successful as those before them have been.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dominant culture refers to the longstanding history and influence of whites within a capitalist system that perpetuates institutional inequity through established systems and structures of their own design. These systems, and the culture at large, has created barriers to entry for all non-dominant groups and thus limits their access to opportunities, knowledge, and the power associated.

## **Introduction**

This study explores the perceptions of fourteen Latinas from a single-sex, low-income, urban Catholic high school regarding the attainment of their bachelor's degree. Specifically, the study explores the successes and challenges the participants experienced in college while pursuing their associate or bachelor's degree. It also identifies the predominant forms of cultural capital: social, familial, linguistic, navigational, aspirational and resistance (Yosso, 2005), along with spiritual capital (Pérez Huber, 2009), that they utilize within their postsecondary experiences. Conversely, the study also examines which forms of capital were lacking and the impact this had on their postsecondary experiences. The study uses a qualitative approach to better understand the perception of students and allow them to speak to their experiences in high school and college. In summation, this study examines the academic and cultural value of one single-sex, urban Catholic school serving predominantly low-income students who will be the first in their family to attend college, providing specific data in an area that is currently significantly understudied.

This study provides a needed snapshot of the perceptions of Latinas regarding the impact their unique Catholic high school setting had on their college experiences. It examines the impact of their sociocultural and spiritual experiences in high school, along with an in-depth examination of the perception of their academic preparedness. The study reveals the strengths and areas for improvement of one school site, which can be generalized to a certain extent for the benefit of similar low-income, single-sex Catholic high schools. I caution an overgeneralization of the findings of this study because each school site is a unique environment. However, I do believe the findings in this study related to the college experiences of Latinas who attend small, mostly Latina high schools, are generalizable.

Participant development of their spiritual and Latina identities at a majority Latina all-girls Catholic high school was of particular interest for this study. Simultaneously, examining the impact the curriculum and college counseling programs had on participants' postsecondary experiences was emphasized to determine the effectiveness of the school's academic program.

The study intentionally sought diverse educational experiences, which included an almost equal amount of community college (n = 6) and four-year university (n = 8) participants. This diversity provides rich data representative of the experience of the school site's student body and data that closely resembles the larger reality of enrollment in postsecondary education generally (Deli-Aman, 2015). Beyond this, with twelve of the fourteen participants being first-generation college students, the study also accurately reflects the student population of the school site where 65% of the students will be first-generation college students (See Table 1). As such, the stories of this diverse group of graduates serve as compelling narratives for future students and the school site to learn from.

The findings from these narratives, and the narratives themselves, will equip students, teachers, administrators, and the college counseling program at low-income Catholic high schools with college knowledge to better prepare Latinas, and other underrepresented Students of Color (Perez & McDonough, 2008). The study provides a much-needed data sample that the school can utilize to make informed decisions specifically regarding academics and college counseling. At the same time, the study adds to the body of research concerned with the cultural wealth of Latinas and the ways postsecondary education promotes or discourages non-dominant forms of capital.

This chapter begins by introducing the funding issues present for low-income Catholic schools and some of the challenges that result. The connection between limited funding and

resources is then explained demonstrating the need for more postsecondary data for low-income Catholic schools. Next, a pilot study (Kinman, 2020) is introduced that shows the value that baseline qualitative data provides specifically in understanding academics and school culture. After this, a basic context for Catholic schools and the diversity within is provided along with a description of Catholic school success. The success in terms of graduation and college matriculation is then juxtaposed with the general lack of data that plagues low-income Catholic schools. Finally, the unique cultural demands Latinas experience in higher education is overviewed alongside an introduction to the framework of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) which guides this study. The chapter concludes with the statement of purpose which outlines what this study will accomplish and how it will add to existent research, along with the research questions used to guide the study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Background to the Problem**

##### *Limited Funding and Financial Capital*

For over a century, Catholic schools have provided an alternative educational option for parents or guardians of underrepresented students, particularly in urban areas where immigrant populations are highest (USCCB, 2021). As private schools, these schools receive very little government funding despite serving predominantly low-income students and are reliant upon student tuition, the majority of which comes through financial assistance and private donors. As a result, the schools have limited financial resources as smaller operating budgets require sacrifices on the part of family, faculty, and staff. For example, it is not uncommon for schools to have a college counselor who doubles as the Academic Dean for the entire school and teaches an additional course or two. This is the case within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles where the three all-girls high schools with the lowest tuition and associated enrollment of the most low-income

students, each have an Academic Dean who also serves as the college counselor (LA Catholics, 2022). Similar demands are placed on teachers and other full time staff members to wear multiple hats to make up for the lack of financial capital. As a result of these challenges, low-income Catholic schools such as these, rely on marketing and recruitment to retain or increase enrollment and ensure their vitality.

As such, these schools need to target their college counseling programs and overall academic preparedness if they are going to continue to remain viable, but to do so they need data that highlights the strengths and assets of their school and areas in which they can improve. Currently, these schools lack this data because of the aforementioned economic challenges. Naturally, they have much to be gained from a study such as this that illuminates strengths and areas for improvement. For example, a pilot study of twenty graduates from one of the three all-girls Catholic schools mentioned previously revealed a lack of preparedness in the areas of math and science, research skills, and analytical writing (Kinman, 2020). The open-ended questionnaire used for the study also revealed the significant forms of cultural wealth the students possess seen through family ties, spirituality, community involvement, peer support, help-seeking practices, and relationship development with adult mentors. The pilot study showed the significance of academics and culture and a need to understand both to determine areas of strength and improvement the site.

This study expands on both, highlighting areas of academic success and areas for improvement using an assets-based approach that emphasizes the interplay of culture and academic success. This study is built on the idea that underrepresented students, in this case Latinas, have various forms of cultural capital that are undervalued within higher education but are essential to their success (Yosso, 2005; Pérez Huber, 2009). This study examines the cultural

wealth of Latinas to better understand this phenomenon and to identify ways in which their unique high school experience contributed to the development of their cultural wealth.

### ***The Catholic School Option for Underrepresented Students***

Small Catholic high schools, like the one in this study, have wavered over the past two decades, riding the ebbs and flows of the 2008 recession and major changes shaping the educational landscape locally and nationally. The introduction of competing charter and magnet schools has created increased competition and the closure of hundreds of Catholic elementary feeder schools has added another challenge (McDonnell Nieto del Rio, 2020). Yet, Catholic high schools have remained open and continued to be educational strongholds in urban communities with consistently high graduation and college matriculation numbers for underrepresented students. In large part, this is because of the fulfillment of their mission to educate society's most "poor and vulnerable."

Catholic schools have remained a viable alternative to public schools for low-income families because of financial assistance, strong cultural, historical, and religious ties with South and Central American immigrant communities, and the diversity of urban schools (Contreras, 2016; Aldana, 2012; Fialka, 2003; USCCB, 2021). To date, the Catholic school system is the largest private school system in the United States with over 5,000 elementary schools and 1,200 high schools, but unlike many private schools, Catholic schools tend to mirror public school diversity in urban areas (Greene & O'Keefe, 2001; USCCB, 2021). Latino students make up 16.8% of all Catholic school students, however, those numbers vary regionally and are much higher in urban centers where first- and second-generation communities are more populous (Contreras, 2016; USCCB, 2021). At these schools, on average over 85% of students receive financial assistance to attend with many low-income schools experiencing rates nearing 100%

(NCES, 2019, USCCB, 2021). Because these schools continue to educate underrepresented groups in large numbers, it is imperative that these low-income Catholic schools have up-to-date college knowledge (Perez & McDonough, 2008) and representative data to help students transition to college and graduate. These schools offer more than just economy, however.

### ***Catholic High Schools and Student Outcomes***

While the financial options make Catholic school possible for many low-income families, parent(s) or guardian(s) who enroll their child(ren) in Catholic schools do so with the expectation that their child will receive formative academic, social, and spiritual education that will equip them for higher education and the workforce (Contreras, 2016; Aldana, 2012). They also do so because the numbers available tell a story of success. For the 2016-2017 school year 99.3% of all Catholic high school students graduated and 85.4% went onto four-year universities (USCCB, 2021). A diploma, however, is not enough to remain competitive in the twenty-first century economy that requires postsecondary educational training in a skills-based job market (Martinez et. al 2017).

Current research (Carnevale & Stroll, 2011; Martinez et. al, 2020) and NCES (2019) data highlight the significant disadvantages that Latinas face in higher education that makes filling those positions more difficult. Systemic inequity historically and currently shapes higher education institutions, which has led to the exclusion and mistreatment of Women of Color specifically (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020; Anzaldúa, 1987). As such, Latinas and other Women of Color, need counternarratives of women who successfully navigate the higher education world not designed with them in mind (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). They need to see which academic supports and cultural resources were used by others to overcome inequities amassed against them. The research in this study provides a clearer picture of this reality through

counternarratives, specifically the postsecondary experiences of Latinas from low-income Catholic schools and in what ways their unique high school education provided them with the skills and capital necessary to persist, graduate, and enter the job market.

### **Narrow Manifestation of the Problem**

At low-income secondary Catholic schools' diplomas are being granted but what happens to students beyond high school is largely a mystery. These schools rarely have data beyond graduation and college selection to help them better prepare future students and strategic plan for their curriculum and college counseling programs. The available postsecondary data is most commonly made public for marketing purposes, or as a part of archdiocesan-wide (city-based) initiatives. Similarly, the largest database for Catholic education, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has no college graduation data (2020). Furthering this data vacuum is the practice of many large university systems that group all "private school" students in the same categories, despite vast inequities between schools and the corresponding student populations (See Table 1).

### ***Existing Gaps in the Research***

Homogenous grouping of private schools within large higher education data systems ignores vast differences between the most affluent and prestigious private schools serving mainly upper-class White students and low-income Catholic schools serving mostly underrepresented Students of Color (See Table 1). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), along with large systems like the University of California (UC) system, group students this way (NCES, 2020; University of California, 2020). Some large systems, such as the California State University (CSU) system have recently (2018) introduced disaggregated data for private schools



that provides extremely useful reference points in determining student preparedness, but at this point this is the exception rather than the rule (California State University, 2022).

It is important to disaggregate data generally for large categories such as school type, and it is even more useful when data disaggregation goes further to gain greater insight into a specific population of interest. The case study at hand provides information for different types of higher education institutions and their support of Latinas. This information can be utilized by the school site itself, along with postsecondary institutions to determine ways to better serve underrepresented students graduating from low-income schools more effectively. Data, however, offers an incomplete understanding of student experiences, which is why a qualitative study was selected to promote and amplify student voice. In doing so, rich descriptions from full narratives emerge that capture the participant's diverse experiences in secondary and postsecondary learning.

### ***Familismo and Community Cultural Wealth***

Another challenge for Latinas from low-income schools is that college readiness indicators tend to focus on academic achievement, failing to consider the larger cultural realities facing Latinas in postsecondary education. Latinas experience unique tensions in higher education. For instance, navigating educational landscapes demands understanding dominant forms of institutional capital, such as independence and self-sufficiency, while simultaneously navigating *familismo* (family) values such as cooperation and interdependence (Espinoza, 2010). The result most often is bicultural adaptation that is “necessary for survival” (Espinoza, 2010, p. 320) as Chicana feminist theorists (CFT) have described it. Yet, in time Latinas may see their biculturalism not just as a means of survival but as a source of strength. Sadly however, some will not, as institutions promote and demand dominant forms of cultural capital which in turn

suppress opposing cultural values of Latinas (Vera & de los Santos, 2005, Garcia, 2017; Delgado-Bernal et. al, 2009).

Determining the students' perceptions of themselves, their cultural identity, and their navigation of postsecondary cultural experiences is central in determining the benefits or shortcomings of a single-sex Catholic education. To effectively do so, education must be understood beyond traditional social capital constructs and through an asset-based lens where distinct cultural values and experiences are seen as wealth rather than deficit (Yosso, 2005; Solórzano et. al, 2005). From this Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) perspective, the experiences and values of Students of Color are shown to be assets that help them persist and graduate in college rather than deficits, and emphasis is redirected for institutional change rather than the individual. Telling their stories, which Solórzano & Yosso (2002) identified as "counter-stories," serves to counter deficit storytelling. As such, this study will specifically utilize the work of Yosso (2005) who identified six tenets of Community Cultural Wealth: familial, social, aspirational, linguistic, resistant, and navigational capital. In addition, Pérez Huber (2009) identified a seventh tenet, spiritual capital. She discovered that Latinas, in particular, utilize this additional form of capital to overcome barriers to their education. As such, this is an important additional lens which this study utilized to better understand the experiences of Latinas in postsecondary education.

### **Statement of Purpose**

All-girl Catholic schools are uniquely suited to provide the academic and social capital expected of Latinas while nurturing their bicultural identities as Catholic education and Catholic Social Teaching specifically, like *familismo*, promotes family values, interrelatedness, and cooperation, all the while promoting a strong education (USCCB, 2021; Garcia, 2017). Single-

sex schools serve Latinas well, evidenced by graduation numbers and through other studies that note community as a major asset of Catholic schools generally (Aldana, 2012; Bryk et. al, 1993). However, whether all students from these schools develop the social, cultural, and academic skills to obtain postsecondary and higher education degrees is understudied. Understanding the unique cultural experiences of Latinas at schools such as this advances the research aimed at describing college readiness beyond the academic sense and through a cultural capital lens. Furthermore, an assets-based approach that also examines the student's perceptions of the barriers and challenges they experience once in higher education allows for an examination of the unique curricular program offered at the high school and its impact. To what extent students were prepared or not for both the academic and social reality of postsecondary education, and to what extent the high school's academic, spiritual, and social culture contributed to this preparation is the focus of this research. The findings illuminate the strengths of the school and provide ways the school, and similar schools, might improve in the future. To examine these topics, the following research questions have been developed:

**Research Questions:**

- 1) What challenges do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What challenges are identified by participants attending community colleges?
  - b. What challenges are identified by participants attending universities?
- 2) What successes do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What successes are identified by participants attending community colleges?
  - b. What successes are identified by participants attending universities?

- 3) According to Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic school, what forms of cultural capital did they rely on to support them and to overcome challenges?
  - a. To what extent do they attribute the development or acquisition of these forms of capital to their high school education?

**Research Design:** This qualitative study gathered meaning through multiple qualitative approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Based on the research questions and the seven tenets of CCW, a question protocol was designed for the semi-structured focus groups (See Appendix item B). The choice to keep the questions semi-structured allowed for myself, the facilitator, to delve deeper into topics as they arose. Similarly, semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilized after the focus groups to explore topics of interest from certain participant stories. Having multiple qualitative methods enriched the data by providing greater clarity and meaning through the participants' stories and collective experiences.

Throughout the study, I utilized a social constructivist approach as it allowed me to rely on the participants' view of the situation being studied and the meaning they associate with it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A constructivist approach guided and encouraged participants to talk about topics and ideas they assigned value and meaning to, not what they believed others or myself, the researcher, assigned value to. To expand on participant values and meaning construction, four participants were selected for the in-depth interviews. Each of the four were able to expand further on specific themes using intentionally open-ended questions. Research on interview strategies stresses the value of an open-ended qualitative approach with well formulated questions based on information gathered from previous methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using multiple qualitative methods also ensured the research questions were answered with depth and clarity.

**Significance of the Study:** This qualitative study provides a small, urban, low-income, single-sex Catholic school with data highlighting the effectiveness of their academic program generally, and the college-counseling program specifically. Through the analysis of participant stories, this study offers some ways that the school site might improve both. The study also highlights significant forms of cultural wealth that helped students earn their bachelors' degrees and the extent to which these forms of cultural wealth were promoted and fostered at the school site. With respect to the unique nature of each school, the study findings can be applied to a certain extent to other Catholic schools with similar structures, student populations, and demographics. The findings of this study also benefit Latinas pursuing higher education generally and postsecondary institutions interested in research that seeks to understand how to best support underrepresented Students of Color

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this review is to provide the context in which Latinas at low-income Catholic school's experience high school and subsequent postsecondary education and to examine the connected literature. I begin by presenting a comparison between an elite private school and the school site for this study to provide context for the massive variance when using the term "private schools." After this, I explore some of the shortcomings of K-12 public education generally which results in parent(s) and guardian(s) enrolling their child(ren) in Catholic schools. I then present a brief overview of the history of Catholic schools, particularly as it relates to Catholic Social Teaching and the Dominican tradition, which is the Order<sup>2</sup> of the school site for this study. Next, some academic and cultural differences between low-income Catholic and public schools are examined to better understand the current academics of both and the cultural values espoused by each. The review then transitions to a college focus with an emphasis on the importance of college counseling, college knowledge, and college choice specifically as it pertains to Latinas. Subsequently, the most important factors for Latinas in where they attend college are presented alongside an analysis of college graduation rates at different types of institutions. Lastly, the CCW model is overviewed using case studies to guide. This model serves as the framework for this study, and the case studies demonstrate its success in supporting Latinas in postsecondary education.

#### *The Vast Differences Within "Private Schools"*

Although the term private school is applied universally to Catholic schools and other non-public schools, there are stark differences between schools within this large "private school"

---

<sup>2</sup> A religious Order in the Catholic Church is the title given for different Catholic groups throughout history who have taken solemn vows as part of a specific religious community and tradition. Each Order has its own founder who most often has also become a Saint. This founder gives the Order its namesake.

category. Table 1 below demonstrates the differences between what would be considered an elite private high school and the school site for this study, Saint James, both of which are in the greater Los Angeles area. School # 1 has massive tuition costs, expansive college counseling programs, and a student population that is mostly White. Nearly all students from school # 1 go to elite four-year universities where with few exceptions they will graduate, many from the nation’s most elite universities.

Private School # 1	Data Points	Saint James
\$42,600	Tuition	\$7,500
80%	% of Students Paying Full Tuition	2%
20%	% of Students Receiving Financial Aid	98%
n/a	% of Students Classified as Low-Income	65%
55%	Students of Color	100%
279	Number of Students in 2020 Graduating Class	61
100%	% of 2020 Class Attending 4-Year University	81%
0%	% of 2020 Class Attending Community College	19%
19.7%	% of 2020 Class Attending Ivy League Schools or Stanford	0%
N/A	% of First-Year College Students	66%
9	Number of counselors employed for Seniors	1

Table 1: Private School Comparison Study: Los Angeles, California

\*\*Although this data comes from the 2020 pandemic year, it is consistent with data from both schools over the past five years (Private School Review, 2020).

Impressively, as demonstrated by Saint James, low-income Catholic schools will typically achieve a perfect graduation rate and college matriculation rate as well, but at a fraction of the cost. The tuition cost difference is glaring but perhaps even more significant is the difference in full paying students. At private schools this is a significant indicator of the financial reality of the

school as private schools rely on tuition for capital, and as such this number also directly impacts other academic indicators of success, such as the number of counselors and classroom size (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Like the students, parent(s) and guardian(s) who send their children to these private schools represent extreme differences. Low-income Catholic schools enroll mostly low-income students from working-class neighborhoods and families who go onto become first-generation college students. While elite private schools enroll mostly White students from affluent families with much higher levels of parental education, two of the strongest indicators of educational outcomes (Noguera, 2008; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Low-income Catholic schools, like School #2, provide financial assistance to nearly all students and families, and as such these schools lack the same financial capital that other private schools have. As a result, it is likely that these students graduate with academic gaps that present challenges once in higher education, but what those gaps are and what factors contribute most exactly is unknown. However, knowing the differences in socioeconomic status, parental education levels, and which colleges or universities are attended, it can be inferred that students from low-income schools will not all graduate although all will attend college. Because it is less likely that all students from low-income private schools graduate from college, understanding the successes and challenges they experience in college is imperative.

### ***Academic Preparedness and Cultural Identity***

At the same time, academics alone can only capture part of the story as low-income schools are also places of rich cultural wealth, diversity, community, and religious practices and traditions which serve students during their college years and beyond. Various forms of cultural



wealth cannot be accounted for through academic analysis alone and as such this study seeks to not only understand participants' academic preparedness but also their cultural identity.

Understanding their cultural identity is significant in their academic journey as culture is a galvanizing force for them in higher education but also can present them with a culture of difference that conflicts with values of the dominant culture. Research shows that cultural difference perceived as a strength, or an asset, can greatly aid underrepresented students in higher education (Delgado-Bernal et.al, 2009), but many students also experience the overwhelmingly different world of higher education as a world where they neither fit in, nor can they navigate a path to completion (Vera & de los Santos, 2005, Garcia, 2017).

Therefore, this study identified the academic formation (both strengths and areas for improvement) of students at one low-income school, while simultaneously examining student perceptions of their cultural identity and how their unique high school experience helped or failed to support them in meaningful ways. The findings from this study serve as a resource for low-income schools who do not have the same financial resources as other elite private schools (as demonstrated by Table 1), which they are grouped alongside in major databases. Before exploring K-12 public and private schools in greater depth, an examination of high school and college graduation numbers provides context for the study and the need for ongoing research regarding Latinas in education.

### **Latinx Education in the 21st Century: By the Numbers** ***Graduation Numbers: High School and Postsecondary***

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shows Hispanic students graduated from high school at a rate of 80% in 2016-2017, up five percentage points from 2012-2013, and the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics increased 119 percent from 2006-2007 to 2016-2017 (NCES, 2019). However, as Hispanics remain the fastest growing population in the

United States, the vast overall increase in Hispanic students in public schools would suggest a much higher increase in degree completion for these students if they were being adequately prepared for college (Martinez et. al, 2020). In short, the gains do not match the growth of the population and a closer examination of degree completion numbers of all students provides a more representative picture showing a still-existent equity gap that is substantial (NCES, 2019).

Numbers for Hispanic students attending higher education have increased in recent decades similar to that of high school graduation numbers, but graduation rates remain vastly lower than the numbers for their White and Asian counterparts. In 2019, only 21% of Hispanic students earned a bachelor's degree or higher while Whites and Asians had rates of 45% and 71% respectively (NCES, 2020). Graduation numbers for Hispanic students over the course of six years of postsecondary education, evidenced by a public and private combined graduation rate of 54%, show a slight narrowing of this gap, but that means nearly half of Hispanic students are still not graduating after six years of paying for higher education (NCES, 2020).

Furthermore, at more selective public and private four-year universities where Hispanic students are more likely to graduate in four or six years, these and other underrepresented students are admitted at much lower rates than their White and Asian counterparts (Roksa et al, 2007; University of California, 2020). For Hispanic students, the likelihood of attending more elite universities with strong institutional support where they are most likely to graduate remains extremely low. Subsequently, Hispanic students instead enroll at community colleges at higher rates than any other group of students where they experience low rates of completion for two-year degrees and transfer to four-year universities (Contreras, 2016).

### ***Ongoing Need for More Research***

Similar to high school graduation rates, the average for all Hispanic students in postsecondary education jumps up 8% if students attend a private postsecondary institution (NCES, 2020), but for a myriad of reasons which will be discussed later in this chapter, Hispanic Catholic high school graduates are much more likely to attend public universities even after meaningful experiences within Catholic secondary education (Contreras, 2016). Also noteworthy is the gender difference for Hispanic six-year graduation rates with Latinas 8% higher than Latinos but this number still only puts them at 62% for all public and private universities (NCES, 2020). In short, the numbers for Hispanic students in higher education demonstrate the need to continue to make this an area of interest that researchers and policymakers should invest in.

Public school culpability in the underwhelming numbers of degrees awarded to Latinas is evident, but whether the same indictment applies equally or to a lesser or greater degree for Catholic schools is less clear. A brief exploration of some factors contributing to the shortcomings of public education which in turn leads parent(s) and guardian(s) of Latinas to enroll them in Catholic schools will provide the needed historical and contemporary context for this study.

### **Why Choose to Pay for Catholic Education**

#### **The Shortcomings of Public Education**

##### **Segregated Schools and Unequal Resource Distribution**

Students who attend schools equipped with more resources tend to have parent(s) who did the same, and as such these families and students, continue to accumulate greater advantage from year to year with the inverse also being true (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Mordechay & Orfield, 2017). Early educational research focused on schools themselves and classrooms as places where inequity manifests, but more recent research contends that family and

socioeconomic status are even stronger predictors of educational outcomes (Noguera, 2008). Research has continued to indicate the significance of family environmental factors that propel students with the advantage of more educated parent(s) to higher-performing schools. Segregated schools serve as evidence to this reality. In K-12 education, Hispanic students are 60% more likely to be at a school with a 50% or higher minority population, which is a data point that has consistently been linked with lower performing schools (NCES, 2019). Advantage born from family contributes to a system ripe with inequity that impacts students' college aspirations well before they even get to high school. However, for all the research attributing educational outcomes to family, the school environment still matters immensely.

Educational research continues to show significant differences in public schools, such as unequal access to resources and segregation, as major factors contributing to an unequal education system that disproportionately disadvantages Students of Color. Nearly seventy years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and seventy-five years after *Mendez v. Westminster*<sup>3</sup> (1947), ample evidence demonstrates the negative impact segregation still has for Black and Brown students at K-12 schools (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2022). In a more recent landmark supreme court case, *Williams v. California* (2001), the state recognized how unequal California public schools were, seen in the shortcomings of schools to provide a book for every student, a basic minimum requirement for learning (Oakes & Lipton, 2004). The case was brought on behalf of students from some of the most impoverished schools in the state.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mendez v. Westminster* is a landmark educational law case involving the segregation of public schools in California. The Mendez family children were forced to go to the “Mexican school” that by all accounts was sufficiently lacking, instead of the public school. The Mendez family, along with other Mexican American parents, challenged segregated schooling on 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment grounds to “equal protection under the law.” The Mexican American families won the case and one of the earliest battles for the desegregation of public schools.

As it was in the case of these public schools, resource scarcity is generally much more common for Students of Color, many of which live below the poverty line.

Similarly, within these schools, the same Students of Color who are the most likely to not have a book, are much more likely to be expelled or suspended creating even greater barriers to education (Condrón, 2009). Recent scholarship continues to highlight the nature of schools as places guilty of reproducing inequality through segregated schools, unequal access to resources, and disproportionate disciplinary measures that negatively impact Students of Color. These inequities consistently lead to a curriculum that often produces the same result.

### ***Student Tracking and the Achievement Gap***

As Condrón (2009) determined through curriculum examination, the achievement gap is furthered during early school years through ability or skill grouping, which once established is likely to continue throughout high school. Skill grouping, or “tracking” as it is often referred to, places students from disadvantaged social classes, most often Students of Color, into slower learning groups while advantaged White peers tend to be placed in the higher achieving groups. Some researchers estimate that more than 95% of middle and high schools use some sort of tracking (Akos et. al, 2007). These experiences have a dramatic impact on a student’s academic identity and subsequently their future academics as well. In a study of 522 eighth grade students from four middle schools in North Carolina, the connection between academic and career trajectory and prior educational experiences, mainly tracking, was shown to be extremely significant (Akos et. al, 2007). Additionally, the findings supported earlier research that connected the “aspiration achievement gap” (p. 61) with background differences, especially socioeconomic status (Akos et. al, 2007; Burks, 1994). This research supports the idea that the

cycle of poverty is reinforced by schools that do not encourage students' academic and career aspirations, but rather hinder students through tracking.

The four schools that Akos et. al (2007) examined lacked the diversity to determine if race played a significant role in student tracking but other studies with more diverse student populations have shown race certainly plays significant in tracking. For instance, studies show that Black males who are the most likely students to be expelled or suspended are also the least likely students to take Advanced Placement (AP) or other more advanced courses, which are indicators both of aspiration and opportunity (Condrón, 2007; Freelon & Rogers, 2012).

### ***Standardized Testing and Stereotype Threat***

Standardized test scores that would allow Students of Color to get back into the AP track or other advanced courses, are fraught with inequity as well, chiefly among the issues with standardized testing is stereotype threat (ST). ST theory asserts that historically marginalized students, mainly Students of Color, perform worse on exams out of fear of fulfilling a stereotype, or adherence to the stereotype, that lowers their performance on the exam itself (Lyons et. al, 2017). Stereotype threat is reinforced through the actions of teachers and professors who knowingly and unknowingly “microaggress” students on the basis of race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). Microaggressions, as described by Kohli & Solórzano (2012) are subtle daily insults that demean Students of Color and promote minority inferiority. Added up, the barriers presented in K-12 education for Students of Color make their journey to higher education ripe with challenges and hurdles. As detrimental academic experiences from early adolescence through middle school accumulate, students lacking academic direction and guidance will continue to struggle in high school if the cycle continues (Alemán et. al, 2015).

**K-12 Inequity Continued: College Counseling and College Knowledge for  
Underrepresented Students in High School**  
*Which Students Benefit Most from College Counselors?*

The cycle of academic inequality that began before high school is exacerbated for Students of Color once in high school where tracking continues and college counseling again advantages students with greater social capital. Part of the role of a college counselor is to help students acquire “college knowledge,” or the formal and informal skills that allow a student to gain admission and to navigate the postsecondary world (Perez & McDonough, 2008). However, research on college counselor’s show students who are more likely to experience lower levels of academic achievement will experience lower levels of support from counselors (Engberg & Gilbert, 2013; Holland, 2015). Engberg & Gilbert’s (2013) mixed methods analysis of the 2009 High School Longitudinal Study utilized regression analysis of the study’s 21,000 students, along with school counselor interviews, to identify significant factors in four-year postsecondary enrollment. One major factor identified was the organizational habitus (the school’s habits and dispositions that make school culture) of the school itself. Another factor instrumental in the important development of a college-going culture was the counseling department, accounting for as much as 11-12% variation in four-year college matriculation for students (Engberg & Gilbert, 2013). This study and others (Holland, 2015) point to the enormous caseloads, along with the demands of more expectant students, which result in an unequal allocation of their time for less demanding students. This issue often occurs along racial lines where White students approach the counselor in a transactional manner, whereas Students of Color look to establish trust first before seeking assistance.

### ***Mistrust Amongst Students of Color***

For first-generation students, of which Latinx students comprise the largest number, the need for school counselor support and guidance is even more significant, but research shows mistrust often develops between Students of Color and counselors. Perez & McDonough's (2008) instrumental work in the field identified how students with greater social capital resulting from their socioeconomic status or family educational background utilize the student-counselor relationship to their advantage, while those lacking modeling sources for these behaviors are often left in the cold. Similarly, Holland (2015) concluded after a two year qualitative study at two racially and economically diverse high schools that the students who benefited most from the college counseling program were typically White, higher-performing students who tended to develop greater trust with the counselor while Students of Color often developed mistrust. Counselors, along with teachers and parents, are significant adult figures, and developing relationships with adults who can guide them through the college process is critical, especially for first-generation students (Roorda et. al, 2011). For students who do not rely on counselors, developing a relationship with other adults can serve as rich sources of college knowledge, but a major challenge for many first-generation Latinx students is that this source most likely will not be their parent(s) (Perez & McDonough, 2008).

### ***Lacking College Knowledge: Who to Turn to?***

Many first-generation students who are unable to turn to their parents for college knowledge, and at the same time are distrustful of their college counselor, will go on to make their college decision based on their perceptions of financial aid eligibility and the advice of their peers. As they lack support and knowledge in the area of financial aid, many will settle on the least expensive option, rather than the optimal academic opportunity (De la Rosa et. al, 2006;



Fann et. al, 2009). One of the results of this is that Latinx students enroll at community colleges at higher rates than any other group even when other options present themselves (Contreras, 2016). Although peer networks, as forms of social capital, are proven to have some positive impacts (Reem & Rumberger 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005), students' dependent on their peer network alone put themselves at a disadvantage; lacking adult guidance in the all-important choice of where to attend college, how to navigate the finances of higher education, and what to expect when they arrive on campus.

### ***Deeply Supportive but Lacking College Knowledge: First Generation Parent***

#### ***Misunderstandings***

In addition to lacking college knowledge, studies have also shown that first-generation students' parents tend to underestimate the value of the counselor-student relationship generally and struggle to distinguish between high-value events and less significant ones (Fann et al, 2009; Enberg & Gilbert, 2013). In a study of the parents of first-generation parents (n= 23) where random selection ensured that students from the College Prep track and non-prep track were selected from two different high schools, interviews revealed that parents did not distinguish importance between various college information events. As such, prioritizing the most significant ones was a challenge. They also believed that scholarships were the only route to financial funding for college (McBride, 2012). Although all parents in the study were actively involved in their child's education and encouraged them to get good grades, the college experience remained elusive, leaving them subject to inaccurate ideas about finances, and overall, with fewer resources to help their child(ren).

### ***Equal Responsibility: K-12 and Higher Education***

K-12 education alone does not bear responsibility though; the P-20 educational pipeline that includes both higher education and K-12, both bear responsibility in the reproduction of inequity (Martinez et. al. 2020; Solorzano et. al, 2005). As outlined above, within K-12 public education segregated schools consistently place Latinx students in lower-performing schools and districts (Oakes & Lipton, 2004; Condrón, 2009), class tracking disadvantages Students of Color (Akos et. al, 2007; Freelon & Rogers, 2012), and inequitable access to college counselors leads to lower college completion rates for Latinx students (McDonough, 2005; Holland, 2015). For all of K-12's shortcomings, higher education similarly disadvantages Latinx students leading them to enroll in the least selective higher education institutions where they are least likely to be successful but most likely to be admitted (Moore & Shulock, 2010; NCES, 2019; Contreras, 2016; Carnevale & Stroll, 2011; Martinez et. al, 2020).

### ***Catholic Education for Immigrant Families: Hopes for a Brighter Future Social Capital and Enrollment Opportunities***

As a result of inequity within P-20 education parents, students, educators, and lawmakers have increasingly sought out alternative options to the traditional public education system with Latinx students in mind. These alternatives to traditional public schools now include popular charter and magnet schools, a constant topic of interest amongst educational policymakers and researchers. Even though policymakers have shifted the conversation towards new school models and competition has increased, Catholic schools have remained a viable alternative to public schools too, as they have for well over a century.

Parent(s) or guardian(s) enroll their students in Catholic schools for various reasons, but one of the most significant is the social capital provided through the school community, especially from adult leaders, such as teachers and counselors (Aldana, 2012; Contreras, 2016;

Garcia, 2017). Given the unequal results and access to resources found at many public schools, Latinas and other Students of Color are enrolled in urban low-income Catholic schools in the hopes that they will receive a more equitable education. This education should ultimately ensure their high school graduation and subsequent college success. In addition, there is a long relationship between the Catholic Church and immigrant communities that serves as the cornerstone on which families entrust their children and a portion of their income to Catholic education.

### ***Brief History of Catholic Education***

Historically, immigrant communities have enrolled students in Catholic schools to receive a quality education, and to avoid xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment in urban areas. Beginning with European immigrants, mainly on the East Coast of the United States at the turn of the 20th century, a Catholic education that included the “three r’s” of reading, writing, and arithmetic was made available by the religious (nuns and other clergy members) (Aldana, 2012). The education received was often bilingual and multicultural in curriculum and pedagogy (Greene & O’ Keefe, 2001). Continuing to be a haven for immigrant families, and affordable at the same time, Catholic schools continued to enroll students from immigrant families throughout the middle and latter part of the twentieth century. Catholic schools have continued to evolve alongside immigration patterns with the largest number of Catholic schools now residing in the Western and Southwestern United States where the highest number of Central and South American immigrants also reside. By the early 1980s, Catholic schools enrolled minority students at a similar rate to their public school counterparts and this pattern continues in major metropolitan areas today (Aldana, 2012; Greene & O’ Keefe, 2001; NCEA, 2020).

### *Catholic High Schools and Their Vitality*

From the most recent federal private school data available, the number of students attending private schools decreased overall from 2000 to 2015, but the sector that accounts for the majority of the decrease in numbers is K-8 as secondary schools actually saw an 18% increase during the same time (NCES, 2019). Data from the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) shows that since 2010, 911 Catholic schools have closed in the United States but of those schools the overwhelming majority have been elementary and middle schools (NCEA, 2020). Given the projected and current economic impact of the 2020 pandemic these numbers are likely to shift and have already begun to, according to a *New York Times* article that cites the closure of 150 Catholic schools across the country (McDonnell Nieto del Rio, 2020). However, the pre-pandemic numbers represent a persistence of students attending Catholic secondary schools, despite the declining numbers in K-8, and despite the charter school movement during that same period from 2000 to 2015 (NCEA, 2020). Catholic secondary schools appear to withstand the ebbs and flows of education that make them a viable option for students now and in the future, and as such they will continue to produce graduates who go onto postsecondary education at very high rates.

As Catholic schools have historically and continue to educate underrepresented students whom they serve in significant numbers, these institutions will continue to be sources of significant research in understanding student learning. This is especially true of low-income Catholic schools where the majority of students are first-generation Students of Color who will go onto postsecondary education.

### ***A Burden and a Need***

Parent(s) or guardian(s) enroll their children in Catholic education consciously or unconsciously with the expectation that cultural, social, and navigational capital will come with the cost of tuition. The school and the college guidance program specifically, therefore, become a major source of social and navigational capital as underrepresented students enter the world of higher education most heavily shaped and driven by the dominant White culture (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020; Yosso, 2005). The responsibility and heavy burden of graduating underrepresented students and propelling them into higher education is a worthy calling, but the insular nature and non-government status of Catholic schools has left them without data points to indicate successes or shortcomings. Further research is needed to determine if these students are acquiring the forms of cultural capital that make them successful in college, and to better understand how the non-dominant cultural wealth they do possess is assisting them in their postsecondary experiences.

### **A Strong Connection: The Catholic Faith Tradition, *Familismo*, and *La Frontera* Catholic Social Teaching: A Brief Overview**

For most parent(s) or guardian(s) who enroll students in Catholic education, academics are important but of equal importance is spiritual and moral formation, which in Catholic schools is heavily influenced and directed by Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

CST occupies a preeminent place in the teachings of the Catholic Church and in the lives of all Catholics. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote an encyclical delivered to all Church leaders entitled *Rerum Novarum*; the Latin translates to “of revolutionary change” (Catholic Church, 1940). Among other political and social challenges, Pope Leo XIII railed against the miserable treatment of the working-class peoples and unrestricted capitalism. Though strikingly Marxist in

his condemnation of “the unjust few,” unlike Marx and socialists at the time, it was resolute in the value of private property as a human right. The document goes on to declare that capital and labor should be compatible and urges cooperation amongst both, but challenges owners and employers not to look at laborers as “bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character” (Pope Leo XIII, par. 20, 1891). Ultimately, this was a declaration of human rights and a call to harmony and civic unity well ahead of its time.

Subsequent CST work, most notably the work of Vatican II in the 1960s and Pope John Paul II in the 1990s reasserts the foundational concepts found in *Rerum Novarum* for modern contexts. The central tenets of CST today of “solidarity,” “the option for the poor and vulnerable,” and the “dignity of work and the rights of workers” are reverberations of *Rerum Novarum* calling modern people to first care for the most vulnerable members of society and promote justice and equity for the oppressed (USCCB, 2021).

### ***The Dominican Tradition***

Although CST serves as a collective guide for Catholics worldwide, each Catholic order has its own tradition, teachings, founder, and patron saints. To this end, Catholic schools offer rich historical traditions replete with narratives of the saints of the Church who model themselves on the teachings of Jesus Christ, and in turn themselves become models for their religious order and provide direction for Catholic schools bearing their name.

The Dominican tradition is one such order with its roots going back to the 13th century and the life of founder St. Dominic. Known as the Order of Preachers (OP), both priests and nuns of the order commit their lives to the four pillars of the tradition: study, prayer, community, and service. Their lives are lived in community and study which includes contemplation of the Bible or other Catholic holy books independently and collectively as a daily practice. Dominic and the

early friars and sisters took to heart the value of study and contemplation together in the pursuit of truth, or *veritas*, which is the bedrock of the tradition. In an interview with a sister from the local order in Los Angeles, California, she described the importance of communal study saying, “We give to others the fruit of contemplation which leads to greater truth. We don’t always know what truth is but together we keep trying to take the one [truth] that has God’s eyes in it” (Ann, P, personal communication, April 17, 2021). In that same interview, she also referenced that the emphasis on study also includes current events: the study of local news and educating oneself and each other about the most pressing issues of the day. She spoke of trainings she had attended that year (2020) on racism, human rights, the death penalty, transgender rights, and immigration.

In line with the life and teachings of another great saint of the Order, Catherine of Sienna, Dominicans preach that study should extend from one’s head and heart to their lives which should be lived in service to others. Many of the women of this order followed in the footsteps of Catherine of Sienna and work in education; in Catherine’s case it was the education of the incarcerated and those condemned to life in prison, and for centuries since, the sisters have worked in prisons and schools across the world teaching *veritas* through their lives of service. These women dedicate their lives to the teachings of the Church and fulfilling the Church’s mission to provide first for society’s most vulnerable.

Although the Dominican sister’s role at the school site for this study has largely changed over the years with the teaching and administrating being done mostly by lay people, the values of the tradition remain. The service of society’s “most poor and vulnerable,” alongside the pursuit of truth, are engrained in the school’s DNA.

### ***Catholic Social Teaching and Familismo Connections***

Oftentimes, outsiders misunderstand the work of schools, such as Saint James, because a common misconception about “private schools” is that most students come from wealthy families who can afford high tuitions (Fialka, 2003). For many private school students and families, the perception is true, however, a number of private Catholic schools continue their ongoing mission “to serve the poor and the vulnerable.” Historically and currently, this means serving students and families who live below the poverty line who identify as first or second-generation immigrants and whose children will be the first in their family to attend college (USCCB, 2020a). CST, along with the traditions of an order such as the Dominicans, provides a framework for schools, which also aligns with the common value system of most Latino families who adhere to *familismo* values of cooperation, community, loyalty, and the dignity and respect of all peoples (Espinoza, 2010).

Although a source of unity for Catholic schools, parents, and students, Catholic teachings and traditions and *familismo* promote value systems that conflict in many ways with the value system of the dominant culture in the United States. Emphasizing loyalty, cooperation, and interdependence, *familismo* and CST run contrary to the dominant cultural values of independence and self-sufficiency expected of college students (Espinoza, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Dominant cultural values stem from a current and historical White majority fixed on capitalist values, which is seen clearly in higher education, but the expectation for students to fulfill that cultural expectation is understood well before that through schooling.

### ***Biculturalism: La Frontera***

Latinas are torn between these two cultures, facing specific expectations of them from both. They feel and experience these cultural tensions profoundly as the expectations and values



of *familismo* are pronounced for Latinas, while their desire to succeed academically pits them against the requirements of the dominant culture. Anzaldúa (1987) was the first to suggest that Latinas who straddle two cultures develop a third hybrid identity which she referred to as a border culture, or *la frontera*. Ongoing research shows when the individualistic nature of education in the United States squares off with the collective-oriented family culture of Latinas, they develop bicultural adaptation strategies, a skill that Chicana feminist theory highlights as “necessary for survival” (Espinoza, 2010, p. 320; Vera & de los Santos, 2005). For Latinas, their hybrid identity can be, or become, a source of strength and resistance as they navigate a world shaped by institutional racism; or as they fail to see themselves represented in dominant narratives and a college curriculum, it can lead to withdrawal, or stopping out or dropping out (Vera & de los Santos, 2005).

### ***Single-Sex Catholic Schools and Identity Formation***

Educational research has demonstrated the success Latinx students experience in postsecondary education when provided adult and peer mentorship and cultural studies where they see themselves and their culture in the curriculum (Delgado-Bernal et. al, 2009). Single-sex Catholic high schools are uniquely situated: they accept and seek out students that other private schools do not, have strong community values, promote female education and personal development, and have the support of families who identify with and feel supported by the school’s mission. These schools can, and often do, provide a learning environment for Latinas to help them negotiate cultural expectations, along with societal racism and sexism, while simultaneously embracing their bicultural identities and encouraging their viewing of it as a source of strength (Garcia, 2017). In her study examining the cultural experiences of Latinas at a single-sex Catholic school, Garcia (2017) argues that “If students do not develop early the life

strategies necessary to skillfully navigate conflicting traditions and contradicting gender role expectations, many run the risk of abandoning their postsecondary educational aspirations” (pp. 27-28).

However, to what extent these schools nurture the cultural identity of Latinas and the significance of their Catholic identity, is area that has been understudied. Naturally, cultural identity must coexist alongside social and academic development that would lead to success in college if the students will be college ready and successful. To examine this reality with greater scrutiny a brief analysis of K-12 Catholic education is required.

### **Past and Present Evidence For and Against the Catholic School Advantage** ***What is the Catholic School Advantage?***

The 1980s to early 2000s saw a sharp uptick in comparative analysis between public and Catholic schools which showed evidence that a “Catholic school advantage” existed (Coleman et. al, 1982). This Catholic school advantage was well documented and supported using analysis of larger studies, such as the High School and Beyond (HSB) data and the National Longitudinal Survey (NLS). Early studies, such as Coleman et. al (1982) and others (Cibulka et. al, 1982), interpreted the data to indicate higher academic performance for underrepresented students at Catholic schools. These findings were corroborated in later studies, however, there were objections to those findings in the 1980s on methodological grounds and suggestions were made that certain grades did not gain advantages from Catholic school education but data from other grades was indecisive (Jencks, 1985).

More recent studies provide evidence for both sides. A team of researchers looked at the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS) and concluded students in Catholic high schools outperform public school students in all high school grades (Carbonaro & Covay, 2010). Other

grade-specific studies have produced contradictory findings, however. For instance, Lubienski et al. (2008) determined public school students actually outperform Catholic school students in mathematics in 4th and 8th grade based on an analysis of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). They concluded that the public school emphasis on standardized testing in recent decades is a major contributing factor in the narrowing of the gap between Catholic and public schools leading to this public school advantage in math (Lubienski et al., 2008).

### ***Chicago Public and Catholic Schools Compared***

A longitudinal study comparing Chicago public and Catholic schools created one of the largest datasets available for comparative analysis. The city of Chicago, like other large metropolitan areas like New York City and Los Angeles, has an extremely large public and Catholic school system. Similarly advantageous for researchers is the fact that students within the Chicago Catholic Schools (CCS) closely resemble that of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), although students differ slightly in terms of socioeconomic status. Elite Catholic prep schools still exist within major cities like Chicago, but the city's urban schools to a great extent fulfill the mission of Catholic schools "to serve the poor and the vulnerable" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020b) which results in more diverse schools that mirror public school diversity.

In addition to similar school demographics, data availability in Chicago was extensive because of data collection efforts within both school settings. As a result of a collaborative effort between CPS and a research team (Bryk et. al, 2010) interested in assessing five educational pillars they deemed essential in improving student learning, the Chicago School Study was born. Through their efforts they amassed seven years' worth of public school data from 1991-1997. They also concluded that systematic public school reforms resulted in increases in student

achievement, which led the research team to expand their research to compare the outcomes of CPS students to those of Chicago Catholic Schools.

To compare CPS findings to Catholic schools, the Chicago Catholic School Study was born, which similarly partnered with Catholic school principals across the city to gather data through test scores and surveys of the city's students. Halinan and Kubitschek (2012) utilized this data in their comparative analysis of Chicago's private and public school students in sixth and eighth grade. They chose these grades because identified patterns of learning that propel or stunt a student's academic growth appear well before high school (Akos et. al, 2007). Their findings support a narrowing of the gap between public and private school students, and in some instances, they found that public school students mean growth was greater. For example, similar to Lubienski et al. (2008), they found in eighth grade mathematics public school students outperform their Catholic school counterparts in terms of mean average growth. Yet, reading scores reveal a mean growth score for sixth and eighth grade almost identical, but Catholic schools had higher numbers for disadvantaged youth, suggesting that barriers to literacy resulting from background characteristics are lessened when a student attends Catholic school. Halinan and Kubitschek (2012), like Lubienski et. al (2008), contend that reform efforts in public schools in mathematics have proven successful and wonder why Catholic school numbers are low given the significant amount of research on the strong academic culture of these schools. Based on this study, the Catholic School advantage may not be as pronounced as it was in the 1990s and early 2000s before reform-era and standards-driven education began to dominate public schools. It is also apparent that both public and Catholic schools in Chicago, at least, have a great deal to learn from each other.

### ***Recent Catholic School Restructuring Considerations***

Also, significant to consider on the Catholic school side is the financial burden of the past two decades resulting from increased competition for students that has demanded greater funding, time, and allocation of resources to marketing. Over the past two decades in Catholic schools, an increase in the school principal/school president model represents that change astutely as the position of president was designed specifically for marketing and fundraising while a principal continues with the daily operations of the school (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015). The impact of recent reform efforts in both public and Catholic schools, as well as a significant structural shakeup of Catholic education in the past two decades requires more research to determine if, in fact, administrative and marketing constraints have positively or negatively impacted Catholic schools.

### ***The Need for More Catholic School Data and the Problem with Higher Education “Private School” Data Changing Catholic School Demographics and Graduation Rates***

Within Catholic secondary schools, Latinos represent the largest non-white ethnic group attending private Catholic schools as of 2020 at 15.5% with vast regional differences reflecting the larger Latino population overall (NCEA, 2020). For instance, the percentage jumps to 27.8 in what is labeled the West/Far West, which is representative of the long-standing ties between the Catholic Church and the Latino population within states like California, Arizona, and New Mexico (NCEA, 2020). For all Latinos, those who attend Catholic high schools are more likely than their public school peers to graduate and attend college immediately after high school (Contreras, 2016; Aldana, 2012). Catholic high schools boast a near 100% graduation rate and high four-year college matriculation rates; one researcher cites the overall number as high as 85.7% for four-year colleges (Contreras, 2016). However, although Catholic schools have done a

fine job tracking graduation and matriculation rates, data on college completion rates remains scant, if not nonexistent.

### ***A Higher Education “Private School” Data Vacuum***

Higher education data would be especially useful for low-income Catholic schools as resources are finite, budgets are strained, and available data can be misleading. For example, some numbers for Catholic schools, such as the 2020 National Catholic Education Association’s (NCEA) 12:1 student-teacher ratio and a mean tuition of \$11,239 must be weighed in light of school difference. Both numbers are misleading considering the vast differences in Catholic schools, especially if major differences in urban and suburban schools were accounted for, which now actually exceed the number of urban high schools in the United States (NCEA, 2020). Suburban Catholic high schools serve more affluent populations, charge more for tuition, and therefore have the financial capital to keep class sizes low, an advantage researchers cite as positive regardless of school type (Lee & Burkham, 2003; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Another advantage of financial security for suburban schools is the luxury to hire more teachers, again keeping class sizes smaller. Further research that identifies significant differences between urban and suburban, or in other words low-income and affluent Catholic schools, is another area of need but this type of data is certainly complicated by the groupings of all private schools together in most postsecondary databases.

### ***Data in the State of California***

California, the state with the highest population of Latinx students, occupies three of the largest college systems in the nation and serves as a strong representation of data that inadequately captures the reality of private schools. Like the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that groups all private school students together, the University of California

(UC) system, which disaggregates graduation data for public schools, does not for private schools (University of California, 2020). Similarly, data for California Community Colleges (2021), which at over 2.1 million students is the third largest school system in the world, does not disaggregate students by private school type either. The California State University (CSU) system's Office of the Chancellor recognized this important distinction and recently formed a partnership with California high schools to provide disaggregated data for private schools as part of Graduation Initiative 2025 (California State University, 2022). This is a great initiative and more like it is required to provide better data for low-income Catholic schools. As mentioned in the opening of the chapter, elite private schools whose students attend elite universities, know these students will earn their bachelor's degree, but low-income schools cannot make the same assumptions based on the colleges students attend and they need data sources to better understand how to serve their students and utilize their already limited resources. This study, like the CSU initiative, will provide useful data for low-income Catholic schools to begin looking at trends and to begin strategic planning to best support students.

### ***The Need for More Data***

Further, given the student population of low-income Catholic schools, more research on the postsecondary experiences of these students provides value to the larger discussion of Latina education generally and is extremely useful to the school site and Latinas generally. This study and others like it are creating a pool of information about their college experiences that can be disaggregated and understood within the context of their unique high school experiences. Ultimately, the data from this study contributes to a work that begins to combat this data vacuum. Similarly, this research approach highlights the cultural values of students from an assets-based perspective which serves to further research that moves farther away from deficit-

oriented social capital theories and toward asset-based understandings where students are not viewed as the problem and institutional shortcomings are evaluated within the proper context and history. A history replete with inequitable opportunities for Latinas and other Students of Color.

**Another Challenge for Latinas in Education: The Problem of Dominant  
Social Capital Theories**  
*Dominant Culture Narrative Shaping*

Theories regarding forms of cultural capital have historically been shaped by the values of the dominant culture, framing a narrative that compares groups based on cultural knowledge acquisition and shows non-White groups typically lacking the social and cultural capital required for greater social mobility. The ahistoricism of deficit-oriented theories has produced narratives where individuals, rather than institutions, bear responsibility for academic outcomes (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). Historically, academic institutions have served as places of inequity that perpetuate these ideas about capital without consideration of the cultural wealth that non-White students bring that benefit themselves, their communities, and could benefit said institutions (Yosso, 2005). Because theory drives education, some researchers contend that both the theory and the institutions perpetuate low outcomes for underrepresented students.

One such author, Stuber (2011), contends that colleges have and continue to operate as places where social class inequalities manifest and get reproduced. Institutions of higher education, particularly more elite four-year universities, value and expect the types of social capital of the dominant group and consistently reinforce the value of such capital through a dominant cultural narrative. A byproduct of prevalent culturally oppressive practices and theories is microaggressions toward less dominant minority groups as a form of messaging (Yosso et al, 2009; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). The messaging that Students of Color, and Women of Color in



particular, experience on college campuses reinforces deficit-thinking that continues to burden Latinas in their pursuit of education at all levels of postsecondary education.

### ***Refuting and Reshaping the “Dominant” Narrative***

Yosso (2005), along with Solórzano et. al (2005), view deficit theory as responsible for shaping the conversations of race in education which negatively impact Communities of Color. The prominent French philosopher, Bourdieu (1977), theorized that cultural capital, along with economic and social capital, are acquired through both family and formal schooling (Yosso, 2005). He concluded that societal institutions (schools in particular) reproduce these forms of capital with advantages therefore continually going to societal elites, middle- and upper-class students. Bourdieu’s ideas regarding cultural capital have often been used by deficit thinkers “to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). In summation, theorists have inaccurately used Bourdieu’s ideas to compare Communities of Color with the dominant White culture which then shows those Communities of Color lacking.

Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to reshape the conversation, Yosso (2005) presents Communities of Color as places of rich cultural wealth and explains how those types of wealth are not valued within educational circles, including elite universities. For example, the *familismo* values of interdependence and family ties contrasts sharply with higher education’s capitalist-driven emphasis on independence, competition, and personal achievement. Yosso and colleagues (2009) contend that schools need to change, not students, to find ways to invite students and their parent(s) into a curriculum that is inclusive of their culture and values their various forms of capital, rather than suppressing them. The need for new cultural frameworks is

further evidenced by other prevalent frameworks that discount culture and promote assimilation to the dominant value system.

One often cited scholar suggests that underrepresented students will assimilate to discriminatory landscapes through stages of separation (from home and family), transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Contrarily, recent studies illuminate a process of rejection and adaptation, rather than assimilation. In Yosso's 2009 study of Latinx students at three elite universities the conclusion was made that "...severing ties with the people and places representing safety, comfort, and belonging would only exacerbate their sense of isolation and rejection" (p. 17). The world of higher education values certain social qualities outlined in Tinto's theory, such as independence, assertiveness, and help-seeking behaviors and these behaviors are usually reinforced and acquired by middle- and upper-class students (Jack, 2016). Yet, many of these valued behaviors, such as independence and separation, are the opposite of what research has shown to help Latinx students persist and graduate. Furthermore, this type of social capital is based on a socioeconomic value system driven by capitalism that often contrasts with the cultural values Latinx students use when choosing which college they will attend and why. To further understand the cultural values that impact the postsecondary decision for Latinas it is crucial to examine the institutions they attend and the reasons why.

### ***College Considerations: Where Latinas go to College and Some Contributing Factors Choosing Public In-State Universities***

As presented, the value of a Catholic education has a longstanding history within the Hispanic community, however, when students decide which postsecondary institution to attend, factors beyond school type play a much more prominent role. Latinx students weigh factors such as proximity to home, finances, family, and campus climate heavily in their decision. As a result, most students from Catholic high schools will go to in-state public universities, with a small

number attending private universities and out-of-state public institutions (Contreras, 2016). Outlining some of the common experiences of these students provides valuable information to determine what advantages or disadvantages result from these students' Catholic high school education and their college of choice.

### ***Graduation Numbers for Latinx Students***

The 2011 cohort of first-generation Latinas at four-year universities graduated at a rate of 36% within four years compared to 51% for Whites (NCES, 2019). When adjusted for graduation within six years the number rose to 58% for Latinas and 66% for Whites, representing a narrowing of the gap over time but overall lower rates of completion at four-year universities for Latinas (NCES, 2019).

Significant barriers to entry at four-year universities for Latinx students in California, where they now represent the largest ethnic group, has led to massive enrollment within the state's community colleges. Within this system, Latinx students, along with Blacks, have the lowest completion rates and highest transfer rate to for-profit colleges where the completion rates are worse and debt compiles at astronomical rates (United States Census Bureau, 2019b; Moore & Shulock, 2010; Committee on Health, Education, Labor, And Pensions United States Senate, 2012). The graduation rates at Cal States are disconcerting as well, and despite initiatives to increase these rates by 2025 the numbers for four- and six-year graduation rates for all students remains extremely low as of 2018. At eleven of the twenty-three campuses, the numbers for all students graduating in four years was below 20%, and thirteen campuses had numbers below 60% for six-year graduation rates (Gordon, 2019).

### *The Advantage of Selective Universities*

The numbers for Latinx students within the University of California (UC) system and more selective private Catholic universities reveal the reality that more selective public and private universities are the least attended by Latinx students. Table 2 (below) shows the differences between the two most selective UC schools and the two least selective schools:

The Two Most Selective UC's		Data Points	The Two Least Selective UC's	
17.5%	14.4%	Freshman Admittance Rate (LatinX)	85.4%	66.2%
66% *	77.8%	4-year Graduation Rate (LatinX) *2016	41.8%	59.5%
86.3%	87.3%	6-year Graduation Rate (LatinX) *2014	70.3%	74.8%

Table 2: University of California Latinx Selectivity & Graduation Comparison

\*All numbers for first-generation students were nearly identical with one exception here where the first-generation numbers dipped to 57.4%

The two most selective schools have the highest four and six-year graduation rates for Latinx students within the system, while less selective schools within the system graduate Latinx students at much lower rates. One explanation for these numbers is that selective universities have the luxury of admitting the highest-performing Latinx students while at the same time the low number of students admitted allows for the provision of more resources. This reality is not exclusive to public schools, however.

Prestigious private Catholic universities, such as Georgetown and the University of Notre Dame, graduate Latinx students at rates above 90% but compared to other less selective Catholic institutions across the country even greater disparity exists (Contreras, 2016). For example, the 2007 four-year graduation rate for Latinos at Boston College was 82.6%, while two fairly well-known Catholic schools in Chicago had rates of 32.5% and 29.5% (Contreras & Contreras,

2015). This reality highlights the inequity that exists within both public and Catholic postsecondary institutions where the highest-performing Latinx students who get into the best colleges succeed while others struggle. However, this situation for Latinx students is further complicated by the fact that even high achieving students are more likely to select a university closer to home that they visited or learned about from a family member over more selective universities in which they are admitted to (Contreras, 2016).

### ***The Significance of Family***

The reality of choosing less prestigious colleges closer to home represents cultural differences, highlighting both the significance of *familismo* values and siblings with college experience. Latinos and Latinas both rely on siblings or other family members in part because of family bonds, but also because the parents of first-generation students are less likely to possess college knowledge (Fann et. al, 2009; Salas et. al, 2018). In addition, the proximity to home allows first-generation students to visit the college with siblings who can offer valuable insight about campus climate, a factor proven significant for first-generation students (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Furthermore, students who stay close to home utilize their family and social network as a means of strength and support throughout their college years. These factors help to explain why high-achieving students would choose a less selective university and also sheds light on the extremely low private Catholic university enrollment numbers for Catholic high school graduates.

### ***Not Attending Catholic Universities***

The option of attending Catholic Universities would likely appeal to students who attended Catholic K-12 schools as they offer similar upsides, such as smaller classes, a faith-based curriculum, and a general smaller community feel, yet students from Catholic high schools

are unlikely to enroll in Catholic universities (Contreras, 2016). Geographic location, unquestionably, plays a major role as the largest number of Latinx students are in what the NCEA (2020) calls the “West/Farwest” and most Catholic universities are located outside of the region which would require an out of state move and tuition. Although proximity to home is certainly significant, the most salient factor in determining not to attend Catholic universities is likely the overall costs and finances of private universities who can offer more financial aid but whose overall costs still make attendance a frightening prospect. Financial considerations have been consistently linked with Latinx college choice with the factors of avoiding debt and perceived financial risk weighing heavily (Ceja, 2000; Contreras, 2016). Among the many significant factors in college choice for Latinx students, family and finances play such an important role that Catholic universities simply are not viable options for most Latinx students.

### ***Some Other Institutional and Cultural Factors***

Other institutional factors, such as diversity and Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation, contribute to Latinx student enrollment, but the situation is complex. Nunez and Bowers (2011) positively associate higher numbers of Teachers and Students of Color at a high school with four-year HSI enrollment and the same theory is true of universities where students who see other students similar to themselves are more likely to enroll (Orfield, 2017). Distinctions, however, in ethnic background weigh heavily in understanding student choice also. For example, distinctions between Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans clearly indicate the latter being much more likely to enroll at a four-year HSI. This reality is tied to socioeconomic status related to family background as Mexican American students are the most likely Latino/a group to come from families where neither parent attended college (Locks et. al, 2008). Academic background, of course, plays significantly into a student’s college choice as well.

However, because of the very high admittance rates especially at public HSIs, it is less of an indicating factor and more of a stratifying factor, as those with the highest GPA are much more likely to enroll at more selective HSIs and therefore are more likely to graduate as well (Cuellar, 2018).

To better understand the demographic and various cultural factors influencing college choice for Latino/as, Cuellar (2018) utilized data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and differentiated by HSIs, emerging HSIs, and non-HSIs. The sample included twenty-three public and private HSIs, twenty-three emerging HSIs, and 619 non-HSIs. The 2006-2007 HSI sample represented 25% of all HSI designated schools at the time. As might be expected, HSIs and emerging HSIs are places of greater student and faculty diversity, however, the numbers of Latino/a faculty were still extremely low at less than 3% at all three types (Cuellar, 2018). From the analysis, higher-performing Latino/a students with higher levels of family income were more likely to attend a non-HSI and to take into consideration the reputation and rank of the school in their college choice. Like other findings about Latinx college choice, students enrolling at HSIs had the highest level of parental involvement and a natural corresponding desire to live closer to home (Cuellar, 2018). These same students who were most likely to enroll at an HSI were also most likely to be in the lowest income bracket, therefore, making financial considerations more significant in their college decision as well.

### ***The “Marginalized Majority”***

Limited college choices, a lack of college knowledge, and a major aversion to financial debt has made Latinas part of the “marginalized majority” that Deli-Aman effectively describes in her work, “The Traditional College Student” (2015). Outlining a great social misconception about who attends college, she identifies that since the 1960s community college enrollment has

steadily grown making the true “traditional student” community college attendees rather than the myth of four-year university students. She goes on to describe perceived norms, such as a need for students to disconnect from a home community, which were created by misconceptions based on the idea that a full-time, white, eighteen to twenty-three-year-old student was the traditional college student (Deli-Aman, 2015). These popularized theories and misconceptions certainly contribute to Latinx student enrollment predominantly in community colleges, where the time-to-degree completion rate for Latino students was nine years as of 2011 (Contreras, 2016).

### ***Where Catholic Students Go to College: A Summary***

Catholic high school Latina graduates are clearly most likely to initially enroll in a public institution near home after high school as their family and cultural background weigh heavily in their decision. Financial considerations, along with campus climate are also extremely important, but even then, those considerations are weighed within the *familismo* lens where strong family ties keep students close to home. In her research on HSI Latinx student enrollment, Cuellar (2018) notes one of the problems with the generalization of large data, “Treating Latino/a students as a monolith inhibits a deeper understanding of this population and the development of educational environments that best support a multifaceted Latina/o student body” (p. 250). To her point, it is significant to remember that each student and group is complex and grouping them for purposes of understanding the whole has limitations and should serve only as a starting point. However, recognizing specific enrollment patterns and some of the cultural reasons for those patterns serves to better inform institutions about the students they serve which is what Cuellar’s work ultimately accomplishes. In her findings, she emphasized that college choice for Latinx students must be understood within the Community Cultural Wealth model (Yosso, 2005) that shapes their decisions more than traditional cultural capital theories. She recognizes that this



understanding is paramount for Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and all colleges, to truly serve all students well (Cuellar, 2018).

**Reframing the Cultural Capital Conversation: Community Cultural Wealth Models and their Success**  
*Successful Programs*

Latinas and their parents operate, knowingly and unknowingly, within a system that undervalues the forms of cultural capital they possess, such as familial, linguistic, and resistant capital and instead demands the social and economic capital they often lack (Yosso, 2005). Advocates and educators use the Community Cultural Wealth model to promote change through community collaboration and partnerships. Certain K-16 programs, such as the Westside Pathways Project have made great strides to provide an inclusive cultural pedagogy, early college knowledge, and mentorships for young Students of Color from university students who look like them (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2009; Aleman et al., 2015). This program utilizes collaboration between higher education and K-12 schools to better inform students and parents about college, while maintaining and valuing cultural diversity.

Similarly, many states have experienced success because of early college or dual enrollment programs as their commonly called, utilizing a strategy of exposing high school students earlier to rigorous college-level work, and culturally relevant curriculum (Song & Zeiser, 2019). These programs have also proven to increase educational opportunities for low-income Students of Color. The Early College Initiative (ECI) in New York City serves predominantly underrepresented students and 7,000 students in total (2% of high school students in the city). In completing a comprehensive review of the ECI program, Britton et. al (2020) found significant differences in each institution's capacity for teaching and learning, yet the program overall produces graduates who go on to four-year universities 72% of the time, which

is twenty-six percentage points higher than non-ECI Students of Color who also graduate on time within the New York City school district.

The success of these programs is in large part due to the connectedness and reciprocity between institutions of higher education and K-12 schools, a successful collaborative approach lacking in general in K-20 education (Bathgate et. al, 2011). Programs, such as these, provide students and parents early exposure to the college world, and in the case of the Westside Pathways Project, provide incredible resources and avenues to support students' K-16 experience alongside their parents (Delgado-Bernal et. al, 2009).

### ***The Dislocation of the Most Promising Students***

However, the aforementioned programs also tend to be an anomaly for underrepresented Students of Color. Rather, promising students from low-income school districts tend to be recruited to more elite private or charter schools, or often within public schools they will be recruited or selected to join a career academy (Conchas, 2006; Millett & Kevelson, 2020). Underrepresented students who attend these schools, or enroll in these selective programs, gain social capital and have higher levels of enrollment at elite universities but are often removed from classrooms with students similar to themselves. Even with the growth of programs designed to attract and retain underrepresented Students of Color from low-income communities, a huge gap still remains between social classes, with higher class students remaining twice as likely to enroll at elite universities (Roksa et. al, 2007). First-generation students who rise to the top of their class within low-income schools and communities but did not participate in early college programs or academies, still experience significant challenges and setbacks as universities continue to operate as places where social class inequalities are reproduced (Stuber, 2011).

### ***Supporting First-Generation College Students***

Faced with uncertainty, a new environment, and very often feeling like imposters, first-generation college students need access to resources—both on and off campus—to succeed in college. Significant research has been devoted to understanding how first-generation students access those resources, and the reasons why at times they do not. Similarly, many university programs have been created and designed to better support cultural inclusion, belonging, and connectivity on college campuses. On many campuses, diversity and inclusion efforts have been made to ensure that more Faculty of Color are hired and that student organizations are created for and by Students of Color, yet given the numbers it is clear that there is a long way to go. Students of Color, many of whom are low-income, are still likely to experience microaggressions and other forms of discrimination on their college campuses and need more tools for their journey (Yosso et. al, 2009; Solorzano & Perez Huber, 2020). In identifying the value of each student’s community and culture as a source of strength and security, researchers have provided a framework that promotes student utilization of family, home, and community networks, along with on-campus organizations and resources, to help them navigate the journey within higher education (Delgado-Bernal et. al, 2009).

As noted, researchers have attempted to understand the process through which first-generation students and their parents learn about college and make choices (McBride, 2012; Fann et. al, 2009). Programs have been created to better support first-generation parents in their child’s college preparation, and many have advanced their work to begin working with parents in middle school or earlier (Delgado-Bernal, 2009; Bathgate et. al, 2011). Also of significance is the reality that first-generation parents lack context for college having never been themselves, yet once their child has enrolled and persisted in higher education, they will remain for most Latinas

an integral part of their support network. This means that the parent(s) need to be considered and invited into college processes to best support first-generation Students of Color.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review demonstrated both reasons why families choose to send their child(ren) to Catholic high schools and where Latinx students specifically will choose to attend postsecondary education. Further, families who enroll their child(ren) at low-income Catholic high schools do so to promote their holistic development, prioritizing both their academic and spiritual formation. Once these students graduate, for most students financial and family considerations will have the greatest impact on where they choose to go to college. The most likely outcome is a public institution, especially for students in geographic areas where few Catholic universities exist but public universities are abundant. Although Latinas are most successful at more selective universities, most Latinas will enroll at less selective universities, state schools, and community colleges. The barriers to a degree for students' mount depending on the selectivity of the school they attend, with the most selective schools having the highest graduation rates for Latinas, first-generation students notwithstanding. Unlike elite private high schools, a bachelor's degree is not a foregone conclusion and understanding what happens to "private school" students from low-income Catholic schools once they matriculate to college is of great value. The findings of this study provide data to fill the void that exists for low-income Catholic high schools that can be utilized to inform the college choice and knowledge of future students who plan on attending all different types of postsecondary institutions. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the selected methods and how they were utilized to uncover student stories that benefit low-income Catholic schools and the students and families they serve.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this overview is to provide a description of the methods used to gather data and findings to answer the proposed research questions. To begin this chapter an explanation of the research design and rationale is provided. Next, the criteria for site selection is presented along with a description of the site selected for this study and how access to the site was gained. The participants for the study are then overviewed along with a description of the specifics of the focus groups and in-depth interviews. The ways in which those methods were analyzed follows and the chapter concludes with an overview my positionality as a researcher, along with other important considerations such as credibility, ethical issues, and study limitations.

This study investigates the perceptions of alumnae<sup>4</sup> from an urban, single-sex, low-income Catholic high school regarding their college experience. The study used qualitative methods that allowed the participants to describe successes and challenges in higher education. The research provides a clearer understanding of each participant's academic and social development in high school and the impact this had on their postsecondary experiences. This work ultimately supports the future education of Latinas at low-income Catholic schools and the growth of the specific school site's curriculum and their college initiatives.

Further, this study adds to the body of existing research done from a Community Cultural Wealth perspective by identifying forms of capital specific to Latinas. This study uniquely focuses on Latinas who come from low-income Catholic schools and communities, an area understudied and of immense value considering the numbers of students attending such schools.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alumna is the term used for a girl or woman who has graduated from a specific school. Alumnae is the plural and is used throughout this chapter to refer to graduates in SJ who participated in this study.

Instead of narrowly focusing on dominant forms of social capital, a CCW lens allowed me to understand participant's stories within the context various forms of cultural capital, including spiritual capital (Perez Huber, 2009). This approach, in line with similar critical research, acknowledges that students possess forms of cultural capital undervalued generally, but specifically within higher education where dominant White values persist and are reproduced (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). The study also uniquely explores the bicultural navigation of Latinas (Garcia, 2017; Delgado-Bernal et. al, 2006; Anzaldua, 1987) who experience the demands of dominant culture within higher education alongside the common Latina values of *familismo* and the Catholic faith. As demonstrated by the Literature Review, the experiences of four-year and community college students differ significantly. In order to understand this phenomenon better, and specifically how it plays out the school site, the questions were further delineated with those markers in mind. The research questions that guided this study were:

***Research Questions:***

- 1) What challenges do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What challenges are identified by participants attending community colleges?
  - b. What challenges are identified by participants attending universities?
- 2) What successes do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What successes are identified by participants attending community colleges?
  - b. What successes are identified by participants attending universities?
- 3) According to Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic school, what forms of cultural capital did they rely on to support them and to overcome challenges?

- a. To what extent do they attribute the development or acquisition of these forms of capital to their high school education?

### ***Research Design and Rationale***

This study uses qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured focus groups and in-depth interviews to elicit descriptions from participants. Using a multiple methods approach provides participants with opportunities to reflect deeply on their college experience. The open-ended design and nature of the questions for the focus groups (See Appendix Item B) also provides the participants' opportunities to dialogue with their peers and the researcher through focus groups, constructing meaning from experiences together through the process. Similarly, the value of free-flowing guided dialogue was promoted through the open-ended question design for the interviews. This approach aligns with qualitative research interested in the participants' interpretation and understanding of their own experiences and the meaning they construct from those experiences, referred to as constructivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

An alternative design of mixed methods that would have included a quantitative component was considered for the study, however, it was deemed less advantageous. Quantitative data could provide hard numbers to demonstrate certain constructs, such as academic successes and barriers students experienced in college, but because the most significant element of the study is student voice, a qualitative approach allowed for rich descriptions most useful in describing the phenomena pertinent to each research question. Furthermore, because this study is grounded in constructivism, a common qualitative approach which acknowledges that meaning is socially constructed, qualitative research that is both interpretative and phenomenological is ideal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Another important consideration in research design is the uniqueness of the participants in this study, most of whom despite injustices found within the educational system have persisted and graduated. Academic research shows that institutional racism, microaggressions, and sexism are challenges these students will encounter as Women of Color (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020, Solórzano et. al, 2005a). As such, this research takes a critical research perspective acknowledging that power relations have historically shaped institutions to the detriment of underrepresented groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Again, to best understand this phenomenon, qualitative methods are best as they amplify student voice and meaning construction. This type of design relies on the students' perspectives and places them at the center as they work, side by side with the researcher, to identify the challenges they faced and overcome and those that help them back from finding the desired success. Their stories act in and of themselves as important counter-stories to the dominant narrative shaped by systems of oppression, sexism, and racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, sharing their stories with each other allowed them to be change agents within the study as they themselves provided suggestions for future Latinas successful navigation of postsecondary education and ways the school site could improve (See Appendix Item B).

## **Methods**

### ***Site Selection and Overview***

Saint James (SJ) was an ideal site for this study as a single-sex low-income Catholic high school with a majority Latina student population in an urban area. Like all Catholic high schools, the graduation and college matriculation numbers are near 100% with most students going on to four-year universities. Unlike elite Catholic schools, however, SJ sends a percentage that ranges from 10-20% of students to community college each year which also made this an ideal site for the interests of this study. Furthermore, SJ does lack data on their graduates, unlike many elite



Catholic and other private schools able to do this work with large endowments and ample financial capital at their disposal. Finally, SJ also serves predominantly low-income families and has a long history of doing so.

The school is a historically immigrant serving institution that reflects the immigration patterns of the city with the national origin of the families changing over time. In the early 1900s, enrollees included European immigrants but by the middle part of the twentieth century the demographics shifted to most students of Mexican descent and a smaller number coming from Central American countries, such as Guatemala and El Salvador. For the 2021-2022 school year the number of students identifying as Hispanic or Latina was 93%. Other Non-Latino families included a small number of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students (n = 12) as well as a smaller number of African American students (n = 4). Most students come from Catholic families with 93% identifying as such. Families are predominantly low-income (n = 65%) and most students at the school will become first-generation college students (n = 66%). The student population as of 2021 was 283, of which 262 students identified as Latina, making the school ideal for this study with its foci being the Latina experience.

SJ is steeped in the Dominican tradition dating back over a century to a time when the school was fully operated by sisters who lived in the convent right next to the school. Currently, although the convent still stands and the Dominican tradition still guides the school, the school is led by lay people and the last year a sister was a teacher or administrator was 2014. Like many high schools across the nation, their role at the high school has lessened, but having them remain an active presence on the campus is a priority. The Dominican tradition is well-established despite the loss of their daily influence. The school continues to fulfill the core Dominican value

of serving the poor and the vulnerable which has historically meant the daughters of immigrant parent(s) and guardian(s).

Like other low-income Catholic schools, SJ boasts a perfect graduation record most years but lacks data about the postsecondary experiences of the students. Like all private schools, tuition is required, but at this particular school nearly all (n = 98%) of the students receive financial aid in order to attend. The tuition is one of the lowest in Los Angeles at a little over \$7,000 and in addition to financial aid the school uniquely makes every effort for students to attend, rather than using selective processes for admittance. With little tuition money coming in, which all private schools rely heavily upon, the school is limited financially and therefore constrained to a large extent by their lack of financial capital. This constraint is evident through the general lack of data that exists regarding alumnae college experiences.

Given the student population served and the general lack of financial capital it is important for this school site, and others like it, to understand what happens to their students in postsecondary education. Although many students from the school will graduate with their bachelor's degree, it is also likely that some will not. Knowing this, it is even more important to examine the various postsecondary experiences for both those who attend four-year universities and those who attend community college.

### *Access*

The current principal is the gatekeeper at the school site and granted me access. The current study was not born out of concern or curiosity on part of the principal but when I shared the direction of my study they were extremely supportive. The possible negative findings that the study could generate were shared with the principal from the outset. In response, they expressed the hope for discoveries that will “ultimately benefit the future of the school” and were not

concerned with possible negative findings. In addition, I partnered with the Alumnae Director to make contacts with alumnae from year's past. Another partner in obtaining data was the college counselor. They provided me with data from senior surveys from the years 2013-2017 that included contact information for students, as well as their intended college at the time of graduation. This information served as a starting point to reach out to alumnae and recruit participants through email.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

The research questions for this study required a diverse group of candidates to allow for conclusions about their different postsecondary experiences. For this study, I worked with fourteen alumnae with varying postsecondary experiences. I sought to intentionally recruit an equal number of students who began at community colleges and those who began at four-year universities. The breakdown for participants ended up being eight four-year university participants and six community college representatives. Given the immense challenge of finding and recruiting community college students to partake in this study, I was very pleased with the diversity of participants achieved.

From an initial pilot study sent to 150 alumnae from the years 2014-2016, the challenge of response variance became clear as all respondents ( $n = 20$ ) were from four-year universities with all respondents on track for graduation within four or five years (Kinman, 2020). These students were all high-achieving students in high school with the majority taking multiple AP courses and graduating in the top twenty percent of their classes. Most notable from the pilot study was the lack of response from community college students. One reason for this is found in the data. California community college data shows that only 17.9% of Latino students transferred or received their associate degree in three years or less (California Community Colleges, 2021).

Naturally, these students might be reluctant to participate given potential negative experiences in both high school, college, or both. Knowing that their stories were critical to answer the research questions, a concerted effort was made to recruit community college participants for this study.

Recruiting participants required an intentional approach that utilized student and school networks. To accomplish this, I still used email as a starting point but began by emailing only the community college students from each graduation year from 2013-2017. I also offered each participant the small incentive of a ten-dollar Starbucks gift card. In total, I emailed fifty-five potential community college participants from the years 2013-2017. From the initial email, I received seven responses and of those, four would become participants. Even though I struggled to recruit participants, I chose not to expand the candidate pool beyond the year 2013 because of research that indicates the value of recentness when retelling stories (Fowler, 2014). Instead, I utilized snowball sampling and word of mouth with the network of alumnae and teachers at the school. The other two community college participants in the study came because of the teacher network. Two current teachers at the school were able to connect me with alumnae who would also participate in the study. At that point, the total number of community college participants was six. To recruit the four-year university students, I contacted respondents from the pilot study and used the list of emails provided by the college counselor. I contacted thirty-eight four-year university students in total. Of those, ten were part of the original pilot study. Again, seeking diversity within the participant group, I reached out to students from private and public four-year universities and in state and out-of-state schools. With a preexisting interest in the work, I anticipated that pilot study participants would be more willing to help, and I was correct. Eight of the ten chose to participate and they became the eight four-year university participants in the study

### ***Data Collection Methods***

*Focus groups.* As participants committed to the study, I began coordinating the focus groups with the greatest emphasis being placed on time, or completion, and to the limited extent that I could using intentional grouping. The first focus group, for example, was comprised entirely of four-year university students while the second focus group consisted of four community college participants and one four-year university student. Although it was unknown before the focus group, three of the four community college participants within the second focus group had transferred to a four-year university after receiving their associates, creating further connection points amongst the group. In the first two focus groups, I was able to use intentional grouping to match participants with similar experiences, which created more robust conversation because of shared experiences. By the third and final focus group, however, I was struggling to find and maintain participants. As such, the final focus group consisted of two community college participants and two four-year university students, which also worked out extremely well participant dialogue and for the purposes of the study. Upon completion of this focus group, I reached out to my co-chairs to ascertain whether I should attempt recruiting more participants or begin with the interviews. I was advised based on the quality of the data from the focus groups to move forward.

Each of the semi-structured focus group was conducted on *Zoom* and lasted ninety minutes. *Zoom* was advantageous as students from various cross sections of the country could participate and because each of them was already familiar with the platform Each of the three focus group sessions was recorded on *Zoom* and an audio recording device as well was used as a backup. Before beginning the recording, any technology concerns and final questions were addressed. Each focus group began with an introduction to the study (See Appendix Item A) that

outlined the purpose of the study, my positionality as a researcher, and their role as co-researchers in the process.

The question protocol was designed using the three research questions as a guide. It was emailed to all participants ahead of time so they could preview the questions and feel adequately prepared. To promote easy recollection and a clear narrative pattern for the participants, the focus group question protocol was divided into two parts progressing chronologically from high school through college (See Appendix Item B). In the first two focus groups, the question structure was followed more rigidly and elicited a great deal of information about their high school experiences and useful information about their college experiences as well. The responses were providing sufficient data for RQ1 and RQ2 and some data for RQ3, but the time constraint prevented us from completing all the questions in the second half of the question protocol that contained questions directly connected with each of the seven tenets of Community Cultural Wealth. By the third focus group, I had determined that starting with their college experiences and the CCW questions would ensure that each of the three research questions would be more sufficiently addressed. To do so, I amended and rearranged the focus group questions and began with their college experiences along with the CCW questions and concluded with their high school experiences (See Appendix Item C). This arrangement was useful in obtaining larger amounts of data for RQ3. Taken altogether, there was ample data in the three focus groups to analyze.

*In-depth interviews.* Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to elaborate on themes found in the focus groups. Complementing the focus groups, in-depth interviews added greater depth to themes that could not be elaborated on in the focus group setting because of the nature of a group setting and time. The interviews were conducted through *Zoom* and ranged

from forty-five to ninety minutes. I recorded the interviews with both a laptop computer (through *Zoom*) and a recording application on my phone. Like the focus groups, the interviews were transcribed using *Otter.ai*. Data was then safely stored and backed up on my computer after the interviews. I ensured transcription accuracy by reviewing all the transcriptions while listening to the interviews.

The question protocol for each interview was created through close review of the focus group responses. To maintain consistency, I utilized the original focus group question protocol to organize the questions and created individual interview questions protocols for each interviewee using the same number outlining system. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy and an initial round of coding, significant themes were identified for each participant. The themes were evident amongst other participants' stories, and by examining the themes through interview questions, greater depth and complexity was elicited from each interview (See interview question sample: Appendix Item D). As such, the interviews served as a powerful tool for this study and successfully illuminated themes present in the focus groups with greater focus and clarity.

### ***Data Analysis Methods***

A preliminary pilot study was utilized for this larger study to examine barriers and resources twenty students described in their transition to college (Kinman, 2020). This preliminary tool operated similarly to how Fowler (2014) describes the purpose of focus groups, a tool used "...to compare the reality about which respondents will be answering questions with the abstract concepts embedded in the study objectives" (p. 100). Themes that emerged from the open-ended questionnaire in terms of sources of strength and support in college were: (1) the value of family, (2) friendships from high school and new friendships developed in college, (3) spirituality and faith, (4) on-campus clubs, (5) academic supports such as tutorial centers, (6)

adult mentors such as former or current athletic coaches and professors, and (7) first-generation resources. On the other hand, students also acknowledged several challenges such as: (1) academic preparedness especially in math and the area of research generally, (2) imposter syndrome, (3) finances, (4) school and work life balance, (5) realities of a large school, (6) a lack of diversity, (7) family expectations, and (8) the adjustment of attending a large co-ed university. From this initial questionnaire, it became clear that the Community Cultural Wealth model would be an effective framework for this study. Using Yosso's (2005) six categories of cultural capital along with Perez Huber's (2009) addition of spiritual capital served as an effective means to code and organize the data from each method. Although CCW provided an excellent starting point for thematic analysis, I was committed throughout the process to discovering other emerging themes, and possible additional CCW categories, from the available data as well.

Once the data from the focus groups and the interviews was collected and transcribed, the first and second round coding methods used were open and descriptive coding followed by evaluative and provisional coding. In the first round of coding, I used open coding along with descriptive coding to first identify larger categories using simple nouns or other descriptors to describe the phenomena (Saldaña, 2013). An emphasis on In Vivo (word for word) coding was utilized as well in this first round of coding to preserve the voice and language of the participant's that varied from highly academic to highly colloquial. In the second round of coding, evaluative coding was applied to the first two research questions which easily divided the questions into neat categories: challenges and successes in high school and the same for college. Lastly, provisional coding, a categorical coding system that uses preexisting categories, in this case the specific tenets (7) of Community Cultural Wealth, was used to code for each of the tenets. This technique was applied alongside the advice Saldana (2013) notes in the



description of provisional coding in his coding manual: “A classic fieldwork saying goes, ‘Be Careful: If you go looking for something you’ll find it’” (p. 147). Wanting to find CCW tenets but also remain open to new possibilities to the greatest extent, it was appropriate to begin with open coding and In Vivo coding before applying provisional coding. This ensured that potential categories could emerge before the application of the CCW tenets.

To effectively organize the codes, I used *MaxQDA*, a user-friendly coding software ideal for novice coders. This coding system was particularly helpful in allowing me to establish large group codes and organize data within those large headings using many more distinctive subcategories. For example, “college social life/involvement” became a large group category with seven other subcategories that included ideas like study abroad, volunteering, and positive relationships, but “positive relationships” required further categorization for ideas like friends from high school, professors as mentors, and counselors. For further reference, the challenges during college years larger category had twenty-seven subcategories within it for clarity. Another example illustrates the point further: “the positive experiences in high school” category included a subcategory titled, “important adult relationships,” which was then broken down further and included over twenty separate categories for teachers or other adults on campus. As these examples illustrate, this software was extremely useful in keeping data organized as more and more codes emerged within categories.

### ***Role Management & Positioning***

In working with participants, I emphasized my role as a UCLA graduate researcher. It was important that the participants (former students at the school and in most instances former students of mine) understood that as a researcher I did not have an agenda to promote the school. It was made abundantly clear that my agenda was to do sound research that will benefit the

school site and schools with similar demographics, future students, and Latina students collectively. I took extra care to make it clear that we were on this journey together, constructing knowledge together, in an intentional co-collaborator approach to research. These ideas were emphasized in both the language of the initial email that invited participants to participate in the study (See Appendix Item E) and the introduction to the study provided at the beginning of each focus group (See Appendix Item A).

It is important to note that I hold a position of influence as both their former teacher, administrator, and as an adult. Each of the participants in this study were my students, and many in the study I coached in sports or mentored in various other ways, most commonly through student clubs or as part of the international summer travel program which I led. An additional source of influence to acknowledge is my positionality as a White male working with all Latinas. As a White male I represent cultural differences, including the dominant culture, that could present challenges that could make open dialogue challenging. At the beginning of the focus groups, I chose to acknowledge my positionality as a White male seeking to learn about the postsecondary experiences of Latinas. I did this in hopes of creating an openness and candor in our discussions and to recognize the value of their voices as Latinas that have been historically underrepresented. I also emphasized that we are co-constructors of knowledge, and I am invested as a researcher to learn. To further the validity of the study and the candor of their responses, I reinforced that both their ideas and feedback will be anonymous and that they have the right to opt out of the study at any time. Throughout the study, I reinforced that the process is guided by my questions but is meant to be exploratory and if ideas came to mind that they thought would help further the study they should not hesitate to share them.

### *Credibility & Trustworthiness*

This study could have been threatened due to my position of influence that could lead students to respond in certain ways. However, being an adult figure that is well-established and respected by students and the community can also be an asset to a study. Research has shown that within the field of qualitative work positive relationships with participants can afford greater trust from the outset which works as an asset for the researcher in many instances (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, my consistent teaching style that emphasizes open dialogue and sharing when they were my students, is an advantage as opposed to a more authoritarian teaching style. However, it is still possible that some participant responses were formulated based on what they thought I would want to hear despite my insistence to the contrary. From the dialogue that did take place, however, it was clear that openness and trust were valued by all participants and a strong environment for dialogue was achieved in both the focus groups and the interviews. Their willingness to share some of the most challenging experiences they had in their high school and college years speaks to this reality and I was flattered that they would trust me with their stories. One of the other advantages of this study is the social justice nature of it. Focus group participants saw its benefit and how they would help future students most by being completely candid about what worked and did not work while they attended high school and college.

There was also the possibility of underreporting for those students who had a less desirable high school experience or who potentially felt shame because of what they might depict as speaking negatively about the school. To account for this perspective, I included the two students who expressed the most dissatisfaction with their high school experience as interviewees. In revising the focus group transcripts, it was clear that their voices needed to be

represented through the in-depth interviews and allow for their important perspectives to be explored in great detail.

A secondary threat to the study is my own potential bias as a Catholic educator and my investment in the school for over a decade. Although bias is objectively unavoidable, in order to prevent bias to the greatest extent, I had multiple sources review the questions developed for the focus groups and subsequent follow-up interviews. Those sources were both formal and informal, including one of my co-chairs and another professor in the methods course. I also sought feedback from my peers, specifically asking them to look at the question protocols looking for bias, leading questions, or other elements that I may have overlooked. To protect the confidentiality of the study and the students, I did not seek feedback from members of the school community itself.

### ***Ethical Issues***

One major ethical consideration in this study was data access and the protection of information and privacy. To address the issue of information privacy, the data was kept confidential and secure using multiple backups, and under no circumstances was or will it be made available to anyone at the school site. All data is kept on my personal computer which is password protected and files are also backed using *GoogleDrive*. Furthermore, pseudonyms are used for each participant and all members of the school site itself.

General findings that can be used to encourage and promote change at the school site will be provided upon completion of the study to specific stakeholders, but again, all names will be kept confidential. Additionally, I will take specific care in the information which I choose to include and not include about participants as the school is such a small, tight-knit community,

that the inclusion of certain information might lead to the unintentional disclosure of specific student identities.

Another common challenge that occurs for most qualitative studies is the issue of informed consent. Informed consent was dealt with as guided by the International Review Board (IRB) in conjunction with UCLA which provided its own specific forms for consent. All participants were over the age of eighteen and none of the students, to my knowledge, constituted a vulnerable population. However, as the participants do come from low-income backgrounds, extra efforts were made to educate myself about researching underrepresented groups, such as the intentional choice of specific training modules in the IRB certification process.

### ***Limitations***

Due to the nature of the study that takes place at one school site there is the threat of non-generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Naturally, the implications of this research are for private schools and a specific subset at that, low-income single-sex Catholic schools. However, within the study I do not suggest or argue that the intent is for findings to be generalizable beyond similar schools and the population at hand, Latinas from predominantly low-income backgrounds. Furthermore, I have and will continue to emphasize, that each school site and its culture, in terms of both traditional culture and learning, are unique to their school. As such, I caution sweeping application of this study's findings without doing research first at the school site itself. Although many of the findings for this study apply to Latinas generally, others are specific to Latinas who come from SJ and should be understood within the context of the school site, as should the stories of other non-SJ students.

On the other hand, the potential for generalizability is present for the findings related to forms of cultural wealth utilized by Latinas to persist and graduate from postsecondary education. These findings have far-reaching cultural implications that can benefit Latinas themselves as well as counseling programs at large. This study is also of particular importance to college counselors as recent research points to the importance of the movement away from a deficit-oriented approach to counseling and toward a cultural wealth lens that “focuses on and learns from these communities’ [Communities of Color] cultural assets and wealth” (Martinez et. al, 2020, pp. 224-225). Also, as noted in the findings section, this is an area where college counseling programs need to improve.

### **Conclusion**

Researching the higher education experiences of Latinas from a low-income Catholic high school provides valuable data points for the school site and schools serving a similar demographic. The study’s qualitative approach successfully illuminated how alumnae perceive the impact of their high school education both academically and socially from a cultural wealth perspective. The identification of significant forms of cultural capital for the participants and how they utilized them to be successful in college, and to what extent they perceive their high school experience to have contributed to these various forms of capital, did occur. Similarly, forms of capital that are identified by students as lacking will help the school site, and schools like it, identify and understand areas where they need to improve their academic curriculum and social development. By providing a diverse group of participants this study also contributes to the body of research concerned with community college students and the challenges they experience in persisting and graduating, especially in the case of underrepresented students.

## Chapter Four: Findings

*If methodologies have been used to silence and marginalize people of color, then methodologies can also give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance.*

- Solórzano & Yosso (2002) Critical Race Methodology

### Overview

This qualitative study was designed to better understand the college experiences of Latinas who graduated from a low-income, single-sex Catholic high school in Los Angeles, California. Although schools like the one in this study achieve nearly perfect graduation and college matriculation rates, what happens to students once enrolled in college is largely unknown. Most large postsecondary graduation data does not include disaggregated private school data that accounts for extreme differences between schools in terms of financial capital. If this data existed, it could be used to better understand college completion rates for low-income private schools and offer a more complete presentation overall. However, if this data did exist at all levels of postsecondary education, it would simply speak to one facet of their educational experience. It would not capture the complex stories of students from low-income Catholic schools and the successes and challenges they experience in postsecondary education. This particular study provides qualitative data that begins to fill in some gaps in the research.

This study took extra efforts to ensure the complexity of each participant and their cultural capital was captured and that it did not perpetuate a “master narrative.” Dominant or master narratives simply compare the social and economic capital of the dominant group to Students of Color which then shows those students lacking (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For this reason, this study centers the lived experiences of Students of Color and utilizes their voices to present counter-stories that challenge dominant racial discourses and highlight stories of resistance (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). To contextualize counter-stories, this study is built

on the shoulders of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) research (Yosso, 2005; Pérez Huber, 2009) that has identified seven valuable forms of capital Students of Color possess. This framework is a reaction against deficit-oriented theories that focus on dominant forms of capital underrepresented students lack, namely economic and traditional social capital.

Low-income private Catholic schools have a long history of serving underrepresented students, specifically within immigrant communities in urban areas. The school in this study, for example, provides nearly all (n = 98%) families with financial assistance while maintaining the lowest tuition costs in all of Los Angeles. Another unique feature of low-income Catholic high schools is that, unlike elite Catholic and non-Catholic private schools, a significant number of students will attend community college. There, the likelihood of graduating for all students, but particularly for Latinas and other Students of Color, is markedly lower than those who immediately go to four-year universities after high school. Furthermore, the challenges they experience at community college will also be uniquely different (Contreras, 2009). With these students and their stories in mind, a concerted effort was made in this study to recruit community college participants to learn more. As such, the first two research questions were designed to study the experiences of community college and four-year university students, and to intentionally highlight differences that exist. Additionally, the third question was designed to determine the different forms of capital participants utilize in postsecondary education and to what extent these can be attributed to their unique high school experience. The research questions for this study are:

1. What challenges do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What challenges are identified by participants attending community



- colleges?
- b. What challenges are identified by participants attending universities?
- 2. What successes do Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic high school identify in their postsecondary experiences?
  - a. What successes are identified by participants attending community colleges?
  - b. What successes are identified by participants attending universities?
- 3. According to Latinas from a single-sex low-income urban Catholic school, what forms of cultural capital did they rely on to support them and to overcome challenges?
  - a. To what extent do they attribute the development or acquisition of these forms of capital to their high school education?

In the rest of this chapter, each interviewee's story is presented beginning with an introduction that highlights the findings seen through their story. A descriptive narrative style is employed throughout to paint a picture of the four interviewees' high school and college experiences, as well as other significant experiences that shaped their educational experiences. Themes identified in the focus groups are analyzed and interwoven throughout the interview narratives to demonstrate the connectedness of participant experiences. Each theme is then unpacked at length to understand the theme within the context of the larger study. The interviewees were selected from the group of fourteen participants based on college type and themes present in their narratives from the focus groups that allowed me to analyze their stories within the context of all the participants. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees and focus group participants, as well as the high school staff, to protect their anonymity.

## Findings

### *Introduction to Jasmine's Story*

Jasmine Aguilar is an SJ graduate from the class of 2018. Jasmine had a positive academic and social experience at SJ that would inform her college years. However, her science courses left her acutely under-prepared for the courses required as a biology major her first year at Cal Poly Pomona. Along with math, under-preparedness in science was a consistent theme for nearly all participants. Another theme consistent with others, Jasmine would experience extreme culture shock on a “mostly white campus” where she initially struggled to make friends. These factors contributed heavily to the onset depression (a larger theme explored more thoroughly in the third interviewee narrative) she experienced her first year.

To navigate these challenges, Jasmine relied heavily on family. Yet, Jasmine's educational journey highlights the duality that first-generation Latinas experience in postsecondary education - as they rely heavily on their family and community for support but at the same time experience unique pressures from both. To deal with these pressures, Jasmine relied on social and familial capital which as identified by Yosso (2005) extends beyond biological family to “kinship ties” (p. 79) from within the community. In Jasmine's case, she relied on the experiential knowledge and cultural capital of Latinas and other Women of Color, both her peers and adults, who were living or had lived the same reality. In addition, Jasmine would draw strength from her social network and exhibit resistant capital to challenge the inequity she encountered in her college counseling experience. For Jasmine, social, familial, and navigational capital gained during high school were seen through her first-year self-help behaviors and her ability to network with Women of Color, which ultimately led to resistant capital and her second-year academic and social transformation.

### *First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Family Support and Pressure for Latinas*

Long before Jasmine was born, her mother left El Salvador and her life as a teacher, to provide money for her struggling family. Around the same time, her father left Mexico with similar hopes. They met in California and began a life together in Compton where they currently live in the same house where Jasmine grew up. Her parents dreamed of college for all three of their children, but when her older brother dropped out of college his first semester, Jasmine described her parents' "transferring all their focus to her." Their narrowed focus on her had the dual effect of both immense support and intense pressure on Jasmine's academic future. This duality is common amongst first-generation Latinas who value interdependence and family but at the same time cannot rely on their parents to help them navigate college (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Espinoza, 2010).

Jasmine's parental support was most evident through the sacrifices they made that allowed their daughter to attend private Catholic school. For financial reasons, they could not send Jasmine to her top high school choice, a private co-ed Catholic school close to their house. Instead, they found the most affordable option, Saint James, which for them involved a multi-hour commute each day. They were willing to make sacrifices for their daughter's future because they viewed the alternative in the local public schools as unacceptable:

My parents realized like, I don't want to put my daughter in a school here in the Compton district, or even the LA District because my brother went to a public school in South Central and it wasn't the best. So they definitely wanted to put me in Saint James to create better opportunities for myself.

Her parents wanted Jasmine to have opportunities and at SJ their investment paid off. Jasmine, like many students in this study, identified the unique opportunities she experienced because of her unique small Catholic school setting. She thrived there.

Jasmine understood the sacrifices her parents were making to ensure her opportunity for a better future, but she also expressed the intense pressure she felt from her parents in high school and even more so in college. When I asked Jasmine if she felt pressure once her older brother dropped out and her parents' energy and resources turned to her, she exclaimed:

All the time! Even now, though, because I'm actually taking a gap year before applying to medical school. And they're always questioning me. They're like, why, why, why? And I'm like, dude, I need a year for myself, because I haven't been able to do anything. You know, I haven't been able to travel, I haven't been able to do anything for myself. So definitely taking this year off, I told them, and had to explain to them, it'll mentally prepare me for my future career because medical school is not going to be easy, you know? And even after that it's not. So I feel like now they're kind of adjusting to that idea. But, you know, it's always hard for them, I assume.

Jasmine's response illustrates the pressure she's carried since the beginning of college and will continue to carry through medical school. Unlike many participants in this study, Jasmine would try to talk to her parents about her stress. However, when she did, she was met with confusion and condescension. This was consistent in her story. She described her early college efforts and the resulting feelings saying, "When I would come back home and tell them like, oh my gosh, I'm so stressed, this is going on and this is going on as well. They... they would just look at me and be like, what are you stressed about? I'm like, I just told you what I'm stressed about." Although she tried, her parents could not relate to her struggles and continued with repeated "why's" rather than attempts at understanding.

### ***The Pandemic and Online Learning: A Unique Window for First-Generation Parents***

Despite the parental disconnect, it is worth highlighting that living through a pandemic and doing over a year of online learning at home with her family did have a positive impact, an impact that likely would not have occurred otherwise. Jasmine described the change in her parents' understanding of her stress levels during online learning, and her college workload this way:

Yeah, my mom definitely kind of saw because I was taking O Chem too during COVID. So it was like so hard, I was so stressed all the darn time. I would go to office hours, I still wouldn't understand it. I would *YouTube* things, I became best friends with a *YouTuber* that I didn't even know. I became best friends with them because they helped me so darn much. But she definitely saw like, you know, my daughter's putting all this work for this one class because she wants to get a good grade in it. So definitely I believe that that was kind of like the turning point for her. And then for my dad, so I would take an afternoon class for biology of the brain and he was so interested in all the things that the professor would talk about. So he would be like... Oh, are you having class today? And I'll be like, yeah, and he'd be like okay, could you come to the kitchen so I could kind of hear?

The uniqueness of the pandemic presented first-generation parents with a window, an opportunity, to experience Jasmine's college education firsthand.

Despite these opportunities and insight, in the end, Jasmine still felt misunderstood which resulted in high levels of pressure. This pressure was further compounded by the weight Latinas carry as representatives of their community, a community that both supports and expects them to give back to the community itself. Jasmine focused more on the pressure she felt to succeed from her family, but Jasmine's story certainly alludes to the pressure she also felt as a Latina in mostly White spaces, something other participants spoke about specifically.

### ***Further Duality: Familial Capital and the Pressure of Community and the Support Network It Can Create***

Like family, community relationships, or "kinship ties," create support networks but also can create a sense of pressure because many first-generation and continuing-generation Latinas carry their community and its hopes with them. Their community is a support network and source of aspirational capital but being a model for future members of the community simultaneously creates pressure. This added pressure is evident in majority White spaces where Latinas often operate as the sole representative of their culture. This was Jasmine's reality, being the sole Latina in many of her STEM courses. It was also the case for others. In one focus group,

a participant described initially feeling out of place as a Latina but learned to be “very proud being one of the few there [on campus].” Another participant contrasted that pride with the pressure she felt:

But I also feel like kind of... kind of...I also feel like that's why I put like, a lot of pressure on myself, because I felt if I messed up, it'd be embarrassing to the whole community as a whole. Especially since like I said, there's not a lot of Latinas or Latinos on campus. So I just felt if I messed up, it would be a reflection on the entire Latinx community. So that was a form of unnecessary pressure that I put on myself.

Even though she learned to recognize this pressure as unnecessary, it presented a real challenge her first year of college. *Familismo* values, like interconnectedness and selflessness, create a natural desire to give back to one’s community, but this can feel like an obligation or as described “a lot of pressure.”

Cultural wealth describes the value of community commitment through the idea of familial capital, which goes beyond the concept of blood family and includes a “more broad understanding” of family which is best understood as “kinship” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Kin, in this case, can include close family friends, coaches and teachers, or fellow members of sports teams or groups who become like family. As such, the connection between family and community is powerfully linked for Latinas and discussions of family pressure, such as Jasmine’s and other participants in this study, must be understood within this larger family-community pressure dynamic. Although community can be another source of pressure, community or kinship networks, also operate as an essential sources of college knowledge for first-generation students. For example, Jasmine’s college kinship network grew over time and provided her support required to help her deal with the ongoing pressure she felt.

### ***Familial Capital: Developing “Kinship Ties” as a Means of Support and Community***

Jasmine learned to value and develop a strong kinship network in high school through leadership opportunities with adult mentors who supported her and helped her gain resilience. Further, these mentorships and leadership roles would help her develop social and navigational capital that she would utilize in significant ways in college.

Her growth at SJ began early on because she stepped into leadership roles right away. She immediately became a student-athlete, participating in basketball, track, and cross country at different points. Her last two years of high school, she would continue in track and cross country and become the team manager for the varsity basketball team. She served on multiple club boards and became a leader within the Letterwomen organization, an honor for student-athletes with exemplary grades. Distinguishing herself further as a leader, she served on student government each of her first three years and then joined ASB President her senior year. A self-proclaimed “social butterfly,” Jasmine was close with each of the different “cliques” at the school. The small school nurtured her sociability and in return for her efforts, the student body elected her to be president. In this role, she worked closely with the ASB director, Ms. Delgado, who became her confidant and her greatest mentor in high school.

As her mentor, Ms. Delgado nurtured Jasmine’s growth through what Aldana (2012) called *assistance-giving behaviors* which in turn guided her development of strong *self-help behaviors*. As president, Jasmine experienced the challenges that come with leadership, such as time management, constant public speaking engagements, and the emotional toll the demands of such a position take. Naturally, her academics would suffer at times, especially in her most demanding class, AP Calculus. Jasmine would vent to Ms. Delgado who, after intently listening, would provide direct advice: she would implore her to go ask her teachers for help. Jasmine

summarized Ms. Delgado's common response to her Calculus struggles saying, "She'd be like, if you don't get it, go ask questions, you need to be in her [the Calculus teacher] office hours, you need to be there [to] ask her questions so you could understand." In further reflecting on Ms. Delgado's influence, she noted what stuck with her most was the idea that, "If you need help, you have to go ask for it."

Ms. Delgado's mentorship provided Jasmine social and navigational capital that would be invaluable in college. Jasmine learned to advocate for herself using positive self-help behaviors essential in her second-year transformation. As Yosso (2005) acknowledges, the acquisition of navigational capital is critical because Latinas and all Students of Color require the skill to "maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). For Jasmine, this reality was pronounced in her STEM classes where she was often the sole Latina, but also because of cultural differences with her academic counselor. Her navigational capital helped her seek out alternative counseling that served her much better. Equally important, Ms. Delgado's mentorship helped Jasmine develop the habit of seeking out older Women of Color as confidants and supporters when facing challenges, which would also be critical in college.

### ***The Shortcomings of the High School Science Curriculum and Its Impacts***

For all the positive academic experiences Jasmine had, there was one major exception, her biggest gripe with her high school years: the dysfunction of the science department and the overall lack of preparation she received as a STEM major. She described her struggle this way:

I just really wish SJ kind of prepared me for STEM classes. Just because when, you know, like we didn't have a chemistry teacher at all. So it was definitely really challenging in college just because like, my first year I took chemistry one. And I had no clue what to do. So I failed my first midterm.

During the time she references when SJ "did not have a chemistry teacher at all," the school had hired a first-time teacher who quit a month into school; scrambling, for the next month the



school used multiple temporary substitutes without a teaching background in chemistry. The long-term replacement, likewise, had no teaching background at all and Jasmine and her peers in the course, struggled to master the content.

Jasmine described her resulting early college experience as “devastating” and her wish was not only that her chemistry experience had been better but that her whole science experience was more “comprehensive.” Jasmine’s experience reflects a general lack of rigor and opportunity in the science curriculum offered at the time. During her high school years, the curriculum did not include any AP or honors courses. The total number of course offerings in the science department during Jasmine’s time was four, with one singular course option each year. The lack of course offerings had a significant impact on Jasmine’s lack of preparation in addition to the lack of quality instruction in chemistry she and others received.

### ***Under-preparedness in Both Math and Science for Most Participants***

Twelve of fourteen participants noted feeling under-prepared in math or science once they got to college and there were sixteen total references to a lack of preparation in either subject. Like Jasmine, six other participants mentioned being under prepared for science courses, but strikingly ten participants mentioned being under prepared because of their high school math courses and overwhelmed as a result in college. One student explained her reality this way:

When I got to college, I felt dumb. I was stressed. So stressed out that I couldn't understand simple concepts. And that's what I didn't like. Alongside with chemistry, I've had to repeat at least two parts of the [math] series, because the same reason. I don't have that foundation.

Like this student, the majority of the ten participants who mentioned struggling with college math had to retake at least one math course. This participant mentioned having to repeat both chemistry and multiple parts of her math series. For low-income students who weigh financial considerations heavily into their college experience (Contreras, 2016), these are major setbacks.

Furthermore, it was not just STEM majors, like Jasmine, who were negatively impacted but other majors as well. For instance, humanities majors who needed statistics and business majors who needed the prerequisites for accounting and economics, retook their math courses multiple times as one business major explained:

I did have to take all the math over... I had to take Algebra 1 again. The classes were kind of slow paced for me in college just because I did know pockets of it, but I didn't know sufficient enough to be pushed up to the next course. So I did spend a lot of my time taking math courses, taking 18 credits just to fulfill that math credit to be able to, like, take that higher level econ that I needed or that accounting class.

Like Jasmine's high school chemistry experience with first-year chemistry teachers and teachers teaching outside of their content area, other participants noted the same challenge in math. One student noted that her religion teacher one year was also asked to be her chemistry teacher and that same year her "geometry teacher was not a math teacher." Furthering this problem, eight participants also mentioned a general lack of course offerings at the school which included math specifics, like the lack of a "statistics and trigonometry course" that was particularly detrimental to non-STEM majors who needed statistics once in college.

For all of Jasmine's accomplishments and successes in high school, this major shortcoming in STEM contributed in part to the culture shock she experienced her first year at Cal Poly Pomona and to the larger personal crisis she would undergo. When she looked around at her peers, she could not help but compare her skills to theirs. As such, she faced the reality of the racial and academic difference, both of which presented a challenge for her in college. When she failed her first chemistry midterm, her situation quickly became dire with only two other major exams remaining her first semester.

### ***Social and Navigational Capital: Connecting with Women of Color***

After failing her first midterm exam, Jasmine remembered the advice of Ms. Delgado and connected with her professor, Dr. Horikawa, who became a mentor and ultimately helped her turn her academic situation around. Yosso (2005) described this type of behavior as a learned pattern, “Scholars note that historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment and health care” (p. 79). Further, as forms of capital overlap, social capital here is directly connected with navigational capital and the associated idea of academic invulnerability (Solórzano. et al, 2000), or students’ ability to obtain high levels of achievement despite stressful circumstances that put them at risk of dropping out (Yosso, 2005).

It was Jasmine’s social and navigational capital gained in high school that propelled her to reach out for help. After a positive initial meeting in office hours, Jasmine made it a point to attend all of Dr. Horikawa’s office hours sessions. Together, they created an improvement plan for the upcoming chemistry exams where the more recent exams would replace the old grade. Jasmine’s confidence and study skills grew as she worked with Dr. Horikawa. Her exam grades improved as well. She would pass the final two major exams and do well overall in the class, a course vital to her major. She would end up taking three upper-division courses with Dr. Horikawa, and junior year, she received a special invite to participate in her cancer research, an employment opportunity resulting from social capital (Yosso, 2005). She declined given her lack of interest in the field, but Dr. Horikawa connected her with another professor doing Alzheimer’s lab research, an area of particular interest to Jasmine given her grandmother’s diagnosis. She took this opportunity, an esteemed research position, and she put in over a year in the lab working closely with experts in her field.

Yosso's description of social capital as "networks of people and community resources" that "provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p. 79) illuminates the importance of Jasmine's connection with Dr. Horikawa. At institutions like hers with mostly White faculties, Students of Color have more difficulty making connections and networking than their White peers, and as a result their ability to connect with Faculty of Color is critical. Jasmine's ability to do this was nurtured in high school and was critical in her ability to do so in college and navigate mostly White spaces successfully.

### ***Self-Advocacy as a Means of Navigational Capital and Resistance Capital***

Another example of Jasmine's navigational capital paying dividends in college was seen through her advocacy for a new biology major counselor when her first-year counselor failed to support her. Jasmine was initially assigned an Asian male counselor within the College of Sciences whom she did not connect with. She described his unhelpful nature stating, "...he'd be like, very dry. And I would ask him for opportunities, like research opportunities essentially. And he'll be like, 'Oh, I don't know of anyone.' And I'd just be like, *I'm pretty sure you do*, but he just wasn't really helpful." Throughout her first year, she arranged multiple meetings with the program director and requested a new counselor. Finally, at the beginning of her second year, she was connected with a newly hired counselor, Maria. The connection she made with Maria she described passionately saying:

She's great. Like, every time you'd go into her office, just her vibe was like, immaculate. Really, she'll be playing some music and some music that I grew up listening to, some *Bad Bunny* or something, and it just like, it would trigger a memory. She was great. She's very helpful. She's the one that because I took some credits at a community college, so she helped me transfer those. And she's the one that helps me make sure that I'm on track to graduate in my four years.

Jasmine experienced a disconnect with her first counselor perhaps due to both culture and gender but Maria, on the other hand, was a Latina who connected culturally, personally, and

academically with her. Beyond the disconnect, Jasmine was not receiving adequate counseling evidenced by the community college courses that had not yet been credited. His lack of support and help was preventing Jasmine, a lone Latina in STEM courses, from advancing. Jasmine's ability to recognize this and then advocate for herself is a form of resistance capital, capital described by Yosso (2005) as "skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80). Challenging the systemic inequity present in her academic counseling experience was critical to her eventual connection with Maria and her larger transformation in college.

### ***Finding Her People: A New Counselor and Hermanas Unidas***

Importantly, Maria provided better counseling, but she also was a source of further social and navigational capital for Jasmine. She quickly became Jasmine's advocate and champion. Acting now as partners in education, Jasmine similarly shared opportunities with Maria from her growing social network, reflecting her "commitment to community" (p. 79) common amongst Latinas with rich reservoirs of cultural wealth. When Jasmine became involved with *Hermanas Unidas*, a campus organization vital in Jasmine's second year growth, she invited Maria to attend a club event. Maria was all in from the outset and since then has gone on to become the Program Director! Jasmine has also since taken on leadership with the club, becoming a board member her second year. Like cultural capital research that identified the willingness of African Americans to commit time, energy, and financial resources to support the growth and education of African Americans generally, Maria and Jasmine's commitment to *Hermanas* represents their larger commitment to the growth of Latina education (Franklin, 2002). Jasmine credited *Hermanas Unidas* as "the most significant change in college that led to her social transformation," and she and Maria both wanted to see it grow and thrive.

Before her freshman summer though, Jasmine had no idea *Hermanas* existed; it was her social network from high school that would lead to her involvement with *Hermanas* her second year. Her high school friends specifically, another source of social capital, would inform her about *Hermanas* and play an instrumental role in this key discovery.

### ***Culture Shock and the Value of Social Capital: Latinas Helping Latinas Navigate***

#### ***Postsecondary Education***

As mentioned, family pressures and academic under preparedness were first year challenges for Jasmine, but her situation was heightened by her experience at a majority White campus, a stark contrast from her nearly all-Latina high school. During her first year of college her social, navigational, and aspirational capital helped her persist, but she still lacked further capital that would help her create on-campus partnerships with non-Latinas and majority non-Latina student clubs and organizations. As a STEM major, she worked with mostly White professors and students, and she needed support to navigate and overcome the culture shock she initially experienced. *Hermanas Unidas* provided her with the necessary social and navigational capital that would help her immerse herself with non-Latina groups on campus that were vital networks of academic support.

During her focus group and interview, she described the culture shock she experienced in college and the feelings of racial isolation as a Latina. This led to her struggle to make friends her first year which she described saying, “I just could not connect with other kids. I tried, but it just felt like kindergarten all over again.” Jasmine went from the “social butterfly who was friends with everyone” in high school to making no real friends her freshman year. She explained her situation stating:

I would try to talk to my lab partners, and they're kind of dry. I was like, well, maybe they don't want to be friends. So I would kind of put it [a]side and I made a friend in

my English course and she was really nice. And, you know, we ended up doing a project together. But, you know, after you're done with that course, like I, I didn't keep in touch. So I lost that friend. So yeah, it was, it was difficult.

Having friends in each of her high school classes was a mainstay of Jasmine's high school experience. There was a camaraderie amongst students, especially when courses were challenging, and the students would work through their difficulties together. Her first year in college was entirely the opposite which was extremely hard on her. Jasmine's social isolation would turn into depression, and to cope, she relied heavily on the support of her high school friends, in addition to her family whom she would go see nearly every weekend.

Jasmine's high school friends went to different universities across California, but they all found themselves experiencing the same reality: they were Latinas operating in mostly White spaces. As noted by Yosso (2005), People of Color have a history of utilizing social capital to achieve their goals. For example, *mutualistas*, or mutual aid societies, operate amongst Communities of Color as a supportive social network. As the research supports, it was critical for Jasmine and her high school friends to find Women of Color, especially Latinas, to help them navigate this hard reality. Jasmine, however, made no connections with Latinas on campus her first year. Fortunately, a high school friend did, and she would encourage her to do the same.

Freshman summer, she and two friends went to visit another high school friend at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) where, as she described it, "Her friend kept going on and on about this club and eventually I just had to ask. 'Okay, what is this?'" Her friend would explain all about her experience with *Hermanas Unidas*, a non-profit campus-based organization that began at UC Berkeley in 1994 with the goal and purpose of supporting Latinas in postsecondary education. They now have chapters at nineteen California universities; UCSB

having one of the longest histories being the second chapter ever established in 1999 (*Hermanas Unidas Inc.*, 2022). When Jasmine returned to Cal Poly Pomona her sophomore year, she joined.

Jasmine immediately began to make friends with other Latinas on campus through frequent club social events and her social and professional network grew as a result. Through collaborations with other school's chapters, like UCLA and UCSB, her network of friends and mentors grew even further. She described these events saying, "That's where I made, like, some of my best friends at other universities as well." Getting connected with other Latinas on campus transformed Jasmine's overall experience and helped her form community with other Latinas, a network that gave her the confidence and social capital to join and become a member and leader of non-Latina groups as well.

After joining *Hermanas Unidas* that second year, she joined the Global Medical Brigades and the Pre-Medical Student Association. Joining these two clubs helped her make connections with non-Latinas for the first time and form study groups and networks that helped her academically. In addition to her position on the board of *Hermanas*, Jasmine has also become a board member of the Global Medical Brigades. She is still the sole Latina in many of her upper-division courses, but she has met many students she studies with through these clubs.

Upon graduating, Jasmine will go onto medical school where she again will often find herself the lone Latina in largely White spaces, but she will navigate these spaces well because of her social, navigational, and familial capital that grew in her high school years and continued to grow during college. Furthermore, Jasmine has the confidence and support from her social network to resist educational inequities that she recognizes as unjust.

Because Jasmine entered college with social and navigational capital she found success even while struggling her first year, but it is important to recognize that capital begets capital. Her



social and navigational capital grew because of her preexisting social network that helped her create a robust network of adult mentors, *Hermanas*, and eventually non-Latina partnerships on campus. Other students at SJ, however, had different high school experiences and as a result began their college careers with significantly lower amounts of social and navigational capital.

### **Samantha Jimenez**

#### *Introduction to Sam's Story*

Samantha (Sam) Jimenez entered college with significantly lower amounts of social and navigational capital. Her high school experience that was heavily shaped by academic tracking resulted in a lack of academic rigor and subsequent lower levels of academic preparedness for college. Like public school research that demonstrates the connection between academic tracking and lower quality college counseling (Fann et. al, 2009; Holland, 2015), this phenomenon is evident in her story and points to a larger overall trend at SJ. Sam's high school academic experiences contributed to her decision to attend community college right after high school. Beginning college, she was underequipped academically and lacked the social and navigational capital required. As a result, Sam almost dropped out during her very difficult first year at Pasadena City College. Yet, despite facing tremendous odds and barriers to success, Sam refused to give up.

To persist in college initially despite the challenges, Sam relied on aspirational and spiritual capital, and over time she would acquire the necessary social and navigational capital she lacked upon entering college. Unlike Jasmine, Sam did not gain the same social and navigational capital from her time at SJ; her acquisition of these forms of capital would come during college when she benefitted from the mentorship of her boyfriend and his mother. Although the aspirational capital strongly connects with the influence of her grandmother, she

also attributed her strength and resilience to her time at SJ. She also credited her success with her development as a woman of faith and prayer, another phenomenon that SJ played an essential part in. As such, amongst other themes, her story also points to the value of spiritual capital as a means of strength.

### *¡Echale ganas! A Grandmother's Powerful Impact in Forming Aspirational Capital*

Sam's grandmother was the greatest influence in her early childhood, and the person who instilled in her the aspirational capital that allowed her "to maintain her hopes and dreams... despite real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Sam was raised primarily by her grandmother because her parents were both working. Although she did not have the opportunity to go to college herself, she instilled in Sam the value of education and the importance of aspiring for a better future. When asked to describe her, Sam breathed deeply and reached for words to do her grandma's influence justice:

She's such a resilient woman, she's a go getter. Most definitely. She, I mean, she's always worked hard all her life, in Mexico and in the U.S. So, I think it's only fair to her that I try just as hard, if not push a little bit harder, and step out of my comfort zone, when I try to go and achieve something that maybe I feel isn't attainable. But she pushes me to, to really go in, I guess reach for the stars more than anything.

In addition to the rich description above, she brought up the Spanish phrase "¡échale ganas!" to encapsulate her grandma's influence more effectively. When asked to describe the phrase and its significance, she said, "In a nutshell, it's don't give up and strive for more," but then she added:

It's not good enough to just want it, you got to tell yourself you need it, you need to go get it. It's for a greater purpose than you think. It's bigger than just reaching a goal, reaching a milestone, it's becoming a better person, learning things along the way that make you a better person. [It] is definitely a phrase that helps me get by, especially because it comes from my grandma.

The power of "¡échale ganas!" and her grandma's influence are evident in Sam's college years where she faced significant setbacks in her goal to achieve her associate degree and transfer to a four-year university. In her first year of college, these words and her grandmother's influence would not allow Sam to quit when she contemplated dropping out. Her grandmother's hope for her granddaughter informed Sam's aspirational capital early on. Central to this capital is the reality that despite having the lowest levels of educational attainment, Chicanas/os "maintain consistently high expectations for their children" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78), or in this instance, grandchildren. The aspirational capital that Sam's grandmother had for her transferred and became a shared belief that would serve her well in college. Before that though, a brief overview of her high school years will provide context for the larger narrative.

#### ***A Positive Overall High School Experience but Negative Academic Outcomes***

Sam, like Jasmine, took advantage of opportunities present at a small school, but Sam did not experience the same positive academic program because of academic tracking. Sam was involved at the school throughout her four years. She was a member of the Ambassador's society, became a board member of the Praise Night club (a student-led monthly worship gathering), and ran cross country and track until she literally hung up the cleats and became a team manager. Each of these roles required a significant time commitment and promoted her development as a leader amongst her peers. Sam's positive high school experience adds weight to one of the most consistent themes from all participants: the abundance of opportunities available through extracurriculars at SJ promoted student leadership (theme is overviewed in detail in last interviewee's story).

Her reflections on high school were positive when it came to these extracurricular opportunities, but in reflecting on her academic experience overall at SJ she candidly presented

the shortcomings she experienced. Unlike Jasmine, Sam was in the non-AP track and never experienced the rigor of an AP or Honors course. These tracks are largely determined by the High School Placement Test (HSPT) taken in eighth grade and although there is some advancement of students after freshman year to AP or Honors courses, it is rare. Sam, like most, was never advanced. The initial placement for ninth grade year, most significantly, involves math and English placements. Sam's initial placement in non-Honors English and lower-level math largely shaped her high school academic trajectory, which ultimately impacted her college experience as well. The shortcomings she experienced at SJ led to an overall under-preparedness for college, which for her also included a lack of social and navigational.

### ***A Lack of Academic Rigor Resulting in a Lack of College Preparedness***

Sam described an overall lack of academic rigor and low standards for her as a non-AP student which resulted in her being under-prepared in both math and English once she got to college. In terms of math, this meant advancing no further than Algebra II and senior year taking a modified remedial math course instead of Precalculus. The results were detrimental in college. Similarly, in English she would take four years of non-Honors English where both the pace and the expectations for her work was lower. She cited a lack of rigor in writing and noted when she "did try really hard," she "didn't learn or take away as much as I should have," implying that the instruction received in her English courses was lacking. Further, in a more general reflection about her academics, she noted "we [would] get our hand held a lot of the way." She explained how deadlines would get extended and how teachers would track her down to make up missing assignments and require mandatory study hall, something that would be very different than what she would experience in college. She made it a point to acknowledge her own complicity in her

academic struggles, but simultaneously she pointed to the role her overall high school academic experience played in the “rude awakening” she had when she began at Pasadena City College.

***Other Disadvantages Resulting from SJ’s Academic Tracking: The College Counseling Program***

As a first-generation student, like most of the students in this study, she lacked college knowledge and as such required a great deal of input and guidance from the counselor (Perez & McDonough, 2008) but Sam did not receive this. Although Sam spoke minimally about her time working with the high school counselor, many other participants spoke in detail. Nearly all participants described their experiences working with the college counselor in largely negative terms.

One theme their descriptions clearly demonstrated was the trend of favoritism toward AP and Honors students that advantaged them over non-AP students. Three participants noted favoritism contributing to their own challenges or that of their non-AP friends in working with the college counselor. One participant who had “friends on both ends of the spectrum” tried to convince her friends in non-AP classes to apply for scholarships. She described why they did not apply and the defeat they already felt because of their experience with the counselor saying:

I remember telling them like, hey, why don't you guys apply for this, this, and this? And they're like, ‘Well, we're not going to get in any way, so what's the point?’ And I'm like, what are you talking about? Everybody has a chance, at least apply, you know. And they would always say like, ‘No Ms. Correa, she doesn't want to help us or like she hasn't helped us. We've tried going and like whatever.’

Another participant explained that this sort of favoritism resulted from the “regular classes” she and others took. She noted, “I get it, like, I understand, because I didn't take any Honors until like, I think my senior year when I was surprisingly taking three AP classes. So I mean I get it. I get why. Maybe because I was taking regular, you know, classes.” These regular classes that she

is describing are the same courses that Sam was taking. Another participant went further and described the favoritism in harsher terms saying:

I did feel that there was a little bit of favoritism that she was... she always says she was busy, but I felt like she was busy with those students who had really good grades, and girls who were going to really good prestigious schools. And when it came to the rest of us who were going to Cal States, or like, we were going to community college, if that was our plan, she would kind of belittle us in a way that in a, in a subtle way. But you know, it was still felt, it was still seen, it was still... it was still there.

It is worth mentioning this same student went on a college trip with the counselor to the East Coast that she enjoyed but was discouraged from attending the dream school in New York she discovered on the trip because of finances. If Sam met with the college counselor and expressed wanting to attend her dream school, Mt. St. Mary's, it is most likely that she would have been discouraged as well because of financial considerations, one of the most common discerning factors in community college attendance for Latinas (Kirst, 2015).

### ***Exacerbating the Challenges: Going at Things Completely Alone***

Sam's first year college experience overall was dismal: she failed the same math course multiple times, struggled through a self-teaching process in her writing courses, received low grades overall, and did not make any connections with students or adults who could help her academically. The self-help behaviors that Jasmine utilized to improve her first-year academic situation, such as seeking out Dr. Horikawa, Sam had not yet developed. Instead, she described suffering alone and thinking the answer was "just try harder." She never saw a counselor or any adult on campus that entire first year. A cousin who was at a four-year university met with her at one point and encouraged her to go see the counselor, but she noted being "afraid to go" because she "didn't know what major" she wanted to pursue or "what route to go" generally. Feeling lost, she never reached out to the counselor.

Exacerbating matters, as a first-generation student she could not rely on her parents for academic support, but unlike Jasmine she did not have high school friends to support her either. Sam explained that her high school friends were “all at Cal States” which made her feel like the “black sheep.” Citing this difference, she added, “So I don't think they knew exactly what to tell me. And I was also too nervous to even ask.” She went on to describe her immobility and inaction, “God, it was crazy to even approach an adult.” She did not approach any adults that first year, including her parents. Concerning them, she noted that “she did not think they would be able to help anyways,” which she added reflectively was “unfair, but I guess it was the nervousness.” It was not entirely unfair as her father had not graduated high school and her mother had done only a quarter at East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC) before stopping to begin working. During that quarter, when her mom tried to support her with math, they both realized she lacked the prerequisite knowledge required. Despite her mother’s good intentions and best efforts, they both struggled to comprehend the content. Sam and Jasmine had very different first-year academic experiences because of their different support systems and the impact of high school academic tracking but their social experience on their campuses were very similar overall.

***Racial Culture Shock on White Campuses: A Community College and Four-Year University Reality***

One acute similarity noted by Sam, Jasmine, and most participants was the culture shock and corresponding inability to make friends they experienced after their insular high school experience. Jasmine described it saying it, “Felt like kindergarten all over again” and she and Sam both noted that the nature of a mostly White campus was extremely overwhelming. Sam and one other community college participant in their focus group attributed their inability to

make friends in large part to the nature of community college. However, given the commonality of this experience amongst most participants, community college was one factor, but their high school experience weighed heavily as well. A third community college participant in their focus group acknowledged the role that their insular high school experience played this way:

I just picture myself as like, super socially awkward, and I feel like I struggled a lot with trying to make friends my first year. But I think it was just because I was so used to just being around the same people for four years, and even longer than that, because I went to SJ Elementary. So I feel like that was, it was, it was different, not seeing the same people that I was seeing my entire life. I felt like nervous to talk to people.

The “same people” described by the participant above are, of course, other Latinas that comprised the vast majority at SJ. The participant, like Sam and Jasmine, felt lost navigating White spaces without any previous experience being with, let alone working with, non-Latinas. Eight other participants in the focus groups similarly described this experience and how difficult it was finding themselves in mostly White and Asian spaces. Sam described the new environment she encountered in college saying, “...at PCC there's a lot of, it's predominantly Asian, White, honestly, everything else other than Latinos.” She described herself being “shy and nervous” as well. For her the result was what she described as the greatest challenge in college, “going at it alone.”

Another participant summarized the racial culture shock she experienced and connected other factors, such as socioeconomic status, that she also felt unprepared to navigate:

I don't necessarily blame SJ for this one. But like, my first experience at college was a white, affluent socioeconomic and demographic background. And so going to my new school, I was not prepared for recognizing that I was one of four or one of one when it came to, like, me being a brown woman in a classroom full of white people who like, come from the middle of nowhere. I think, maybe this has to do with, like, not getting so much resources from the college counselor. But that like, there was no one telling me like, “Hey, you're going to go to college, and it's going to be this big room of like, different people, and they're not all going to look like you or come from your same background.” And yeah, I think that was... culture shock was just insanelly real.



Although she does not blame the school, there is a plea in her statement that implies she wishes someone would have informed her about what to expect once in college. Sam, Jasmine, and others who experienced this as well would have benefitted from exposure to non-Latinas throughout high school and information about what to expect in terms of the demographics of the student population at their respective colleges.

For most participants, the inability to connect and befriend non-Latina students on mostly White and Asian campuses was a consistent theme that resulted from their time at SJ. This phenomenon contributed largely to their inability to make friends their first years of college. For Sam, these issues were amplified because of the lack of social and navigational capital she entered college with. Fortunately, she would acquire both over time.

### ***The Development of Social and Navigational Capital through Mentorship***

During Sam's first semester of college she did not find any social contacts who possessed the navigational and social capital to support her academically and emotionally. This would change mid-way through her first year when she met her boyfriend who, alongside his mother, became her chief academic supporters and suppliers of college knowledge that would transform her experience and help her get on track to graduate. When she began the dating relationship, she thought that it was just "romantic," but she quickly realized "he saw the potential in me [that] I didn't see." He was going to Cal State Los Angeles (CSLA) at the time (the school Sam would transfer to), getting very good grades, and a year ahead of her. He modelled for her how to be successful in college, but in addition he was "very firm." When she missed an assignment, she would hear "you got to email the professor," and when she failed a test he would ask "why?" He had a "no excuses" approach to education Sam explained and she added, "After a semester or two, I picked up on that great habit." In many ways, her boyfriend operated the same way that

students in the AP and Honors track at SJ did and as a result he helped to fill in many of the gaps Sam missed in high school.

Additionally, when Sam was struggling the most her first year and “really, really, really wanted to drop out,” she described the valuable influence of her boyfriend’s parents, preeminently her mother, a fellow Latina with a higher education degree. She described how dinner conversations would sometimes turn to grades and assignments and if she procrastinated on an essay, for example, she would firmly be reminded that “this is why you think school isn’t for you.” She would then get help from her on the essay. Having both her master’s degree and a regular nine to five job, she provided Sam with the help that her parents could not, even though they wanted to. With the inspiration and encouragement of her boyfriend and the guidance of his mother, Sam developed positive study habits and the confidence required in herself as a student to reach out to other adults for help. Unquestionably, these self-help behaviors were encouraged by the mentorship and support she received from both of them.

### ***Finding the Value of Seeking Help from Adults On-Campus***

What Sam did not recognize her first year was that counselors and professors were the ones most equipped with the knowledge to change her situation; instead, Sam believed the solution was “trying harder.” One positive step she did take in her first year in response to her situation was “living at the tutoring center.” Frustratingly though, Sam still failed multiple math exams which led her to acknowledge she “did not know how to study.” As positive as working with peer tutors can be, Sam still required the guidance and support of adults. Furthermore, after taking this positive and all of her additional efforts, she described now “feeling like a failure.”

Sam’s growth as a student and the positive mentorships of her boyfriend and his mother led to her first connections with adults on campus beginning in her second year. The first time

Sam finally did work with an adult on-campus was with an academic counselor the summer going into her second year. Working with the counselor was instrumental. She immediately changed her major from Nursing to Elementary Education which changed her math requirement from the Statistics course that she failed and retook multiple times to Math 130A. Once in Math 130A though, she found herself struggling still, but this time she finally convinced herself to go to office hours. She described her experience saying:

I went one time and I was so nervous. But then there was, like, three other students in there. And then she started teaching this problem. And I said, 'Oh, my God, I get it now. I get it now.' And I think if I had a bad experience that one time, I wouldn't have kept going. But it was a great experience.

During this quarter, she made office hours a twice a week routine and racked up over fifty hours. She developed a positive relationship and strong rapport with the professor who would offer sessions up to three hours sometimes, and even on weekends, to ensure Sam's success. Similarly, she spoke of developing a strong relationship with her English professor that second year and ultimately she gained the confidence needed to approach her professors for help. Sam ended up passing her math course with a C, allowing her to earn her associate degree and go on to transfer to CSLA.

Seeing the debt she would incur attending a four-year university, she was initially devastated, but this time was different because of the college knowledge she acquired from her boyfriend's mom. After high school Sam turned down her dream school because of the financial costs associated. Sam did this at the time because she felt "her family just could not afford it" and because she "could not do that to her family as the oldest of four daughters." Sam explained, "A lot of time in Mexican families we worry about money. And I think you constantly hear well, in my case, we constantly hear save your money." Her boyfriend's mother was the first person to tell her, "Don't worry about the money." Having her master's degree, she could attest to debt

being scary but also to the fact that it should not be the reason Sam did not go to school and pursue her goals. Sam noted a shift in her mentality and described her new thinking, “Listen, if I spend 10k, 20k, when I get a job, and I save enough money, and I keep pushing to do things that I want to do, maybe finding passions in life, hobbies, I will be able to eventually pay back the money.” This encouragement helped Sam navigate taking on student debt the second time around and she enrolled at CSLA.

Sam would acquire the social and navigational capital she lacked initially in college over time through the mentorship of her boyfriend and her mother. Together, they would provide college knowledge that helped Sam grow as a student and navigate challenges, such as seeking help from adults on-campus and figuring out financial aid and debt. This knowledge and capital acquisition was invaluable for Sam. Yet, before acquiring these forms of social and navigational capital, Sam persisted in her pursuit of a degree, refusing to give up. During this time, she relied heavily on spiritual capital to muster the inner strength she needed to not quit even though she wanted to.

### ***When Times Were Especially Hard: The Value of Spiritual Capital***

Another significant theme from Sam’s story was her appreciation for the religious formation she received in high school that she utilized in difficult times. Sam uniquely valued the spiritual formation she received at SJ and described missing it significantly once at community college. When asked about the idea of her religious formation she said, “...for me to be able to go to a private Catholic school, where it embraces my religion, and my gender. It was just, what more could I ask for honestly.” Sam’s faith grew throughout high school as the school promoted this and she pursued it. The school’s required curriculum includes four years of religion class that covered topics like Catholic Social Teaching, monthly masses across the street at the church,

yearly class retreats, and morning and afternoon prayers. The school grounded Sam in religious tradition and practices, but Sam went further and was a board member of the Praise Night club, an on-campus student-led club devoted to putting a praise and worship night on once-a-month for students.

When she got to college, religion was absent from her academic experience and that was hard for her. She described missing religion class, morning prayers, and mass. In its absence though she remembered what she had learned in high school and applied it to help her during challenging times. She described her reality saying, “I had to, like push myself to stay in touch with God, to keep touch with my faith and myself and everything that I learned within the past four years, like, this is the time to bring it in.” The “time” she is referring to was her first year when she was failing her math courses and considering dropping out. Although she also expressed questioning God during this time she concluded, “I would just pray and hope for the best and my faith got stronger during that time.” Her faith formation in high school played a significant role in prompting her to pray which she credits with helping her through this challenging time.

Consistent with other CCW researchers, Pérez Huber (2009) in her study of ten undocumented Latinas at a UC school, concluded that forms of Community Cultural Wealth (to which she added spiritual capital) “shift and overlap... as they draw from various forms of capital simultaneously” (pp. 19-20). For Sam, her spiritual capital informed other forms of capital but clearly intersects with the aspirational capital connected to her grandma and the power of ¡échale ganas! Sam’s grandmother taught her the power of *esperanza* (hope), even when facing what seem to be insurmountable barriers. This served as a source of strength and emotional support for her, and similarly her faith was an additional source of *esperanza* which

propelled her forward. The value of generational faith and spiritual capital in Sam's story was evident in the challenging journey of another interviewee, Alejandra Rodriguez.

### **Alejandra Rodriguez**

#### *Introduction to Ale*

As a first-generation, low-income Latina whose mother is undocumented, Ale faced significant challenges yet, like Sam, she persevered and found success in college after initial setbacks. The complexity of Ale's story and the short-term nature of her experience at SJ made it challenging to draw conclusions about the impact of SJ on her college experience. However, her story effectively illustrates broader themes that emerged consistently throughout the focus groups and in other participant interviews. For instance, her mental health journey and reluctance and fear to share with her parent(s), in this case her mother, was shared amongst other participants who experienced depression once in college. Similarly, the spiritual and social capital that her mother and she shared through their church operated, not only as a source of strength, but a source of community and kinship that took the form and role of family. Of particular importance, was the church community's role in educating her mom about mental health and encouraging both her and Ale during difficult times. Another significant theme from her story that other participants expressed was the disconnect she experienced with her college counselor and the subsequent comfort and support she felt once connected with a Latino counselor.

#### ***Unique Challenges for Undocumented Students in K-12***

Ale attended eight different schools from when she began middle school to her current college, Cal State Dominguez Hills. In middle school, she began at Nativity Catholic in South Central Los Angeles where she, her mother, and grandmother still live. Midway through the

year, she switched to St. Anne's in Santa Monica when her mother got a new job in that area. Ale described the new school saying, "I really loved it." She went on to explain how her high school experience might have been different if she stayed there, noting that it "fed into one of her dream schools, Notre Dame Academy." Unfortunately, her mother lost her job in Santa Monica which forced Ale to leave St. Anne's. She returned to Nativity, and upon graduating, her mother enrolled her in public school. This experience Ale said was meant to be a lesson, "to show her the difference between a private and Catholic school" and "the negative side of public school." At the end of the year, her mother enrolled her in a co-ed Catholic high school in Montebello, despite Ale's wishes to stay at the public school (the lesson not being what her mother thought it would be). Ale struggled there initially. She was "nervous being the new person" but soccer connected her, and by her junior year she made varsity and was performing well academically, evidenced by her being on honor roll.

Things took a turn junior year when she was expelled for reasons she described saying, "Someone I thought was my friend put a bottle in my backpack before homecoming." At the dance, the bottle of booze was found and she was expelled. That experience was scarring, and Ale was out of school for a month while her mom searched for another Catholic school that would take her right away, rather than at the beginning of the new school year. Ale begged her mom to let her go back to public school. She noted in the focus group that "she did not want to go to St. James at all." SJ though was the only school her mom found that would take her immediately, so she began at her fifth new school in six years.

### ***Starting Over at St. James and the Resulting Mixed Outcomes***

Overall, her time at SJ was mixed as she finished out the last year and a half of high school but this time at an all-girls school. Nervous again to start over and especially "about

rumors” regarding her expulsion, her transition was again aided by sports. By her senior year, she was a three-sport varsity athlete, adding track and cross country to her list of varsity sports. Academically, she was challenged by being promoted to three AP courses senior year and she noted particularly enjoying her AP Spanish Literature and Language course. Yet, she struggled to make friends during this time and although she mentioned making one lasting friendship during these years, in many ways, she was doing things alone.

When it came time for college applications, she was discouraged in her experience with the college counselor, as other participants also experienced. Getting into one of the UCs was her dream, but she was instead directed to apply to Cal States. In describing this interaction and discouragement she felt, she said, “I was like, limited I guess for either like the classes I was taking or basically my whole, you know, like, high school years” and she added feeling that “she just wasn’t helped as much.” Ale was a part of the non-AP track leading up to senior year and she also alludes to the struggles she had previously in high school. Whether she was not helped as much because of her non-AP track or because of her past high school experiences is unclear, but what is clear is that she did not feel supported. Although she did apply to some UCs, she did not get in, and would end up at CSLA.

***Another Setback: Unprepared and Alone at CSLA***

Her first year at CSLA was disappointing and discouraging as she faced the realization that she was not prepared academically, like she thought she was, and she became depressed and turned to drinking to cope. Overwhelmed by her classes and failing most of them, she did not know who to go to for help. At the time, she did not talk to her mother about her academic problems or mental health issues and her roommates she described were facing similar challenges noting, “We were all going through the same boat.” When asked if she had any



meetings with the college counselor or advisor, she said “no” and qualified it saying, “I didn’t know how college works.” She went onto describe how meeting with the counselor was mentioned at orientation, but as she explained, “It’s hard to, like, get an appointment... because it's, it's so many students trying to get in.” Her first appointment with a counselor at CSLA ended up being a required exit interview at the end of her second semester once she had been kicked out for grades. Worse yet, she described meeting with a White female counselor who dismissed her challenges as “mommy issues” and then advised her to, “reconsider your major because it seems like this one is not fit for you.” She walked out and cried and she “felt like a disappointment” in general but especially to her mother and as a first-generation student.

### ***The Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Regardless of School Type***

Like Ale, six other participants mentioned challenges with mental health during their college years. Of the seven total students, six began at four-year universities but three would transfer to community college in either their first or second year. Ale was one of these three. The other two attended small private universities and both emphasized culture shock being extremely pronounced. Only one participant mentioned experiencing depression in high school, but the possibility of under and undiagnosis makes determining contributing factors in college difficult. Notably, however, the years that were most difficult for all participants were the earliest years when multiple participants described experiencing loneliness, imposter syndrome, and culture shock. The interplay of these factors is unquestionable as one leads to another or vice versa.

Not being a mental health expert what I will describe, in addition to the aforementioned contributing factors, is the resources students utilized to work through depression and other forms of mental health. Primarily, relational connections for students with supportive adults

whom they could talk to and student organizations with whom they identified with culturally, served as the most salient forms of support during these years.

### ***The Power of Mutualistas and Other Multicultural Social Networks When Dealing with Mental Health***

For the participants in this study, *mutualistas* or mutual aid societies, were places of rich cultural exchange that provided safe and comfortable spaces to learn and network. These spaces were familiar and safe because of the familiar faces of Women of Color who organized, led, and participated in them and significantly they were places where Spanish was used openly (Yosso, 2005). As such, *mutualistas* offered comfort, support, and stability on college campuses where as Latinas they often felt out of place. In addition to Jasmine, *Hermanas Unidas* was mentioned by two other participants as integral in their college navigation and eventual community formation on campus. Like *Hermanas*, two other participants found *mutualistas* through their university's Greek system where they both joined multicultural sororities. On mostly White campuses, the Greek system and sororities often serve as a stark example of cultural homogeneity which certainly contributes to culture shock and racial isolation, but multicultural sororities in and of themselves resist this. One student who went to a large public university with a large Greek systems explained, "It kind of makes me feel some type of way seeing them like walk in a group, you just feel really out of place, seeing all White, typical sororities [and] frats. And the way they get along with each other." Like the other Latinas in this study, she was seeking diverse spaces where her culture was represented but early in college, she struggled to find them. She found connection and community once she joined a multicultural sorority.

The student quoted above, and others similarly described another space of significant community support and diversity for them was church. Here they found Spanish speakers and a

space rich with cultural links and values connected to their Latina culture and heritage. This form of spiritual capital and its connection to other forms of culture capital, including familial capital, was vitally important for Ale as well. The first step, however, was facing her fears and talking to her mother about her problems, something many participants noted as difficult.

***Not Talking with Parents: A Theme Amongst First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Latinas***

Although Ale's situation was unique as she was coping with her depression and drinking, both the depression she experienced in college and her inability to talk to her parents were consistent themes amongst other participants. Although the topic of not talking openly with parents was consistently paired with talking about mental health, the theme was larger than that. Of the fourteen participants in the study, not one of them described being able to talk to their parents about the pressures they experienced in college, especially in terms of academics. Further, eight of the fourteen specifically described not feeling comfortable communicating with their parent(s) about college generally. Without exception, participants felt supported by their parent(s) but that support did not extend to communicating with them about college pressures or general conversations about classes or other college related topics. This is consistent with the literature that describes the distance between first-generation students and their parents (Perez & McDonough, 2009). As a result, first-generation students rely on other sources for support or go at things alone. Jasmine and other participants in this study found other sources of needed support to deal with college pressures, which in many ways was an acquired skill that began in high school. Like Jasmine, most participants were comfortable approaching their professors for help and cited them as incredible sources of support, especially because they did not talk to their parents. But like Sam, Ale had not yet acquired the social and navigational capital needed to seek

out professors, or other adults on campus, for support in her first year of college. As a result, she went at things alone her and was forced to leave and start anew somewhere else yet again.

### ***What Happens When Students Do Talk to Their Parent(s): Testimonios of Support and Latina Parent Understanding***

The Latinas in this study struggled to communicate their college experiences with their parent(s) in part out of fear, but what this study found was that when their circumstances, or mental health counseling, led them to hard conversations with their parent, they were consistently met with grace, support, and love. Three powerful *testimonios* from the study display this reality.

One first-generation student at UCLA explained what she was going through noting, “I felt like I had no other option but to drop out. Because it was just too much, it was just way too much. And nobody else was talking about like imposter syndrome or like, you know, that feeling of like not belonging.” A couple of factors significant to what she was going through was the “four-hour daily commute” that she endured because she could not afford to dorm and the subsequent lack of socializing that ensued. On top of that, she describes the school culture as “very competitive” and feeling alone and “unworthy.” A professor connected to her “first-generation Scholars Program” who was more of a “friend than a professor” was the first person she finally chose to share openly with. She received support and encouragement from her, and she also encouraged her to talk to her mother. When she told her mother about wanting to drop out, she was relived and encouraged by the support of her mother who let her know, “If you feel like you can't do it right now, then that's okay. She said that school is always going to be there. And I'm always going to have that opportunity.” Being met powerfully with kindness and understanding, her mother’s response removed the pressure she was feeling and helped her

overcome her first-year challenges. She found her footing, her major, and her voice which allowed her to feel supported by her mother.

Another student described her “proudest moment in college” being the time she was able to open to her mom about her depression after receiving help from the on-campus counseling services. Her moment with her mother was born out of a longer process that involved talking to her sister for support, a friend who referred her to the school counseling services, and a powerful story she heard at an *Hermanas Unidas* alumni speaking event. Through all of this she concluded, “I’m not the only one” and she knew she needed to talk to her mother about her depression. She described that experience saying:

I don’t know why I was so scared to talk to her because my mom has always been so understanding. And I think it was just to the point where mentally I was breaking, and I really needed to tell her... So I talked to her and she, she kind of was a little upset at the fact that I didn’t come to her sooner, rather than the whole concept of me thinking that she’s going to be mad because of the reason that I was talking to her.

She too was embraced by her mother who acknowledged her hurt and relieved her of the pressure she felt. Her support and understanding were something that it seems were there all along based on the daughter’s words and the mother’s actions. Yet, talking to her mother was still a fear she had that she had to overcome.

The final testimony is Ale’s story with her mother which powerfully demonstrates the value of social, familial and spiritual capital, further demonstrating the overlap of various forms of cultural wealth present for Latinas.

***Speaking to Her Mother: A Powerful Moment of Change that Resulted in Reestablishing Herself as a Student***

Ale’s transformation began when she spoke to her mother about her mental health issues and then enrolled at East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC). When she enrolled, she

quickly discovered the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which along with her mother became a much-needed source of unexpected support. Ale told her mother about her depression shortly after being kicked out of CSLA and described her mom's response as "more supportive" than she expected, despite all her apprehensions and preconceived notions. Together, they came up with a community college plan to get her back on track. She described having some community college credits from ELAC courses she took in high school which made the transition relatively smooth.

Whether by chance or divine intervention, Ale also began working with multiple counselors with the Education Opportunity Program (EOP) at ELAC. She explained finding the program after seeing a flyer on campus that directed her to their office and "she just walked in." They mapped her academic plan with her, got her top priority for registering for classes, and provided her with book grants. The counselors she worked with in the EOP program were People of Color, mainly Latinos, and she described each with high praise. In describing the counselor whom she met with most often, she said he was, "Very nice, very, you know, supportive and like, listening, which was the most important thing, you know, he listened to what I wanted to do." She drove the point of listening home and it was clear that this was something she lacked in past experiences working with adults, including her experience working with the counselor at CSLA. In her two years at ELAC, Ale would completely turn around her academics, make the Dean's List, and transfer to Cal State Dominguez Hills after completing her associates degree.

### ***The Transfer of Spiritual and Social Capital: From a Mother to a Daughter***

Although Ale struggled to establish community and find help early in college, her mother's community and network of support were a rock for her, and in turn, for Ale. Ale described "going at things alone" before ELAC and in a lot of ways throughout high school as

well, but after talking to her mother she felt she “had more support from her and her grandmother” and she also highlighted the significance of her and her mother’s church. Her mom was, and still is, a catechism teacher for kids and before becoming a catechist teacher herself, Ale volunteered with her mom for multiple years. These catechist teachers are Ale’s mom’s community and as Ale described, “She tells them all my business” and “vent[ed] to them about what I was doing [during college].” They encouraged her to support Ale and helped her understand Ale’s situation more clearly, “They gave her advice... and made her open up her eyes to, you know, that every person goes through their challenges. And [how] depression isn’t some excuse to be lazy or anything, you know, it’s actually very common.” The catechist teachers were her mother’s *mutualista*. They provided her with information to help her overcome the commonly held stereotype that mental health issues are a mask for laziness. Ale’s mother’s unexpected support and understanding were in large part due to the support and insight she received from her network. Her mother’s church community were both a source of support and education for her, and in turn for Ale, as her mother was the only adult she had spoken to about her struggles before going to ELAC.

### ***Spiritual Capital: The Power of Church Community for Undocumented Students***

When asked if Ale identified these people as her community as well, she said, “I feel like they’re also my community” and went on saying, “I could always, like, go to them for any issue that might arise when I’m teaching or anything, they always will have my back.” Ale’s mom did not receive formal education, but she learned how to support her daughter through depression, a bout with alcohol, and navigating college with the support of her church community who helped educate and coach her on issues unfamiliar to many undocumented parents. She now is an advocate of Ale going to therapy, even though she is doing well at CSDH. Although Ale has not

gone yet, she plans on doing so soon. Ale's *testimonio* illustrates the important role that a church network can play in terms of social capital, seen through support and education. Social capital, in this case was gained as a part of the spiritual capital of Ale and her mother, both who serve faithfully as catechist teachers and active members of their church community. For many first-generation, undocumented students, like Ale, and their parent(s), the church community serves not only as a place of spiritual growth but as a place where information exchange provides greater navigational and social capital. In return, this network of people become *familia*, making them a valuable part of first-generation students' familial capital.

Ale's story clearly demonstrates the hardships that undocumented, first-generation students often must overcome. As mentioned in the introduction, it is difficult because of Ale's transitory and unstable high school years to determine what impact SJ had on her postsecondary experience. It should be noted, however, that SJ presented her an opportunity to return to school when her mom and her needed that most. Further, SJ's dual enrollment program certainly provided her with early exposure and college credits at ELAC which made her enrollment and transition easier. To what extent the larger academic and social programs of the high school impacted her in the short time she was there is still difficult to determine.

However, the experiences of other participants, particularly seen through the story of the last interviewee, demonstrate how opportunities at SJ when seized can translate to a wonderful college experience.



## **Angie Ramirez**

### *Introduction to Angie*

Angie developed a robust support system in high school, and she was able to utilize that knowledge and experience to replicate her support system again at college in an environment that mirrored her high school. She described this replication process stating:

I made it, the [high school] experience, what I wanted it to be, and I was able to connect with all these different girls and teachers that were so encouraging, motivating, and having my family that was there for me, and like, always pushed me to achieve whatever I wanted. And, like, if I wanted to do it, that's what I did. And so, I just surrounded myself with a good support system in high school, and really was able to try so many different things in high school, being involved on campus really helped me then, and was something that I was able to translate to being on this college campus.

Angie found that opportunities were abundant at St. James and she took full advantage. She formed lasting friendships with her peers, gained valuable social capital from her teachers, and took on many different extracurriculars that contributed to her personal growth. When she began at Loyola University of Chicago, she entered with the belief that those who want to take advantage of opportunities could, and that is exactly what she did. This knowledge, along with the vital support of her family, even though they were thousands of miles away, were critical in her success and adjustment to life in Chicago. Angie's postsecondary experience also highlights the value of linguistic capital on a social and professional level. Another significant theme present in her story is her identity as a "proud Latina." This theme was consistent amongst other participants and a vital force helping them navigate mostly White campuses. She, like others, identified the central role SJ played in helping her form this identity. Angie consistently went forth with confidence knowing that she had a whole village, her family and community behind her. This knowledge was vital to her success.

### ***Familial Capital: A Long Tradition of Catholic Education***

Angie Ramirez grew up in a large Mexican family surrounded by tías and tíos and cousins from both sides at family gatherings. Her father never attended college and her mother went for a quarter; her older cousins, however, would blaze a trail that would help her effectively navigate postsecondary education.

Like her *primas* (cousins) and *tías* (aunts), Angie was destined to attend an all-girls high school after Catholic elementary, but unlike all of them, she attended SJ rather than the neighborhood Catholic high school. Noting the main difference between the schools and her decision, she described during her school visit, “just feeling comfortable when she walked in,” and that she “clicked really well with the upperclassmen.” This welcoming spirit had a major impact on her decision and future service at the school. Inspired by her experience, she would join the Ambassador’s Society her sophomore year, the same group that warmly welcomed her. In describing her growing role throughout high school, she said, “I just kept getting offered all these opportunities and, like, I kept attending them. And eventually, I was super committed to it.” Her commitment to recruiting events, like open houses and speaking engagements at school fundraisers, was evident and her senior year she became president of the society. As president, she oversaw fifty girls and coordinated the schedules for all events alongside the Marketing Director and the Principal.

Overwhelmingly, Angie had a positive experience at SJ. In addition to being Ambassador’s president, she tried multiple sports, was active in several clubs, and established a very strong friend group. When asked if she thought she would have had the same experience at a larger co-ed school she said, “I don’t think so. I think I would have gotten involved in maybe one thing and stuck with that.” The unique opportunities present at SJ, along with the importance

of the adults who oversaw those opportunities, was present in each of the participants' reflections about SJ.

### ***Social Capital Derived from Opportunities at a Small Catholic High School***

In total, there were thirty-three references to opportunities in leadership mentioned by the fourteen participants, which reflects the unique culture at SJ that promotes students to expand and grow personally in their years there. One of the most consistent opportunities participants expressed was being a part of sports. Thirteen participants participated in at least one sport in high school and seven of them mentioned coaches as significant role models. One participant described the different nature of sports and relationship formation:

I really felt like that created a different relationship than with just my teachers. So, for example, like my freshman year, or I want to say my, yeah, my freshman year, Mr. Na... he was just my teacher that year, he was not the coach. And I will say that the relationship, the support, the comfort level was definitely not the same as it was my last three years of high school.

Her last three years of high school she was a varsity basketball player, and she, like many others, formed a bond with her coach that was stronger than the bond formed with them as a teacher.

The number of athletes certainly reflects an experience widespread amongst the student body and a sports program dedicated to allowing all students to participate. Further, five participants mentioned being a part of student government for at least one year of high school, another opportunity unique to a small school. Multiple students, like Angie, mentioned wanting to start something new and being supported in doing so; Angie started a Fashion Club, another participant mentioned starting a school newspaper, and another student mentioned being a member of the newly formed Fan Crazies club. Each of these opportunities would not be possible without a club moderator, an adult, willing to lead and support such endeavors. This

theme, perhaps more than any other, reflects the school culture and social capital available to students at SJ.

There were thirty-seven references to important adult relationships, but most striking was the diverse group of adults mentioned all who contribute uniquely to the overall school culture. Fourteen different teachers were mentioned, which at a school with a yearly total staff of twenty, reflects diverse connections points for students. Although some students reflected on their academic experiences in the classroom, most reflected on the relationships they established with the teachers generally and the values they learned from their time at SJ. Two student reflections zero in on the mission of the school to empower female voices:

I think SJ also gave me the tools that I needed when I got really like overwhelmed in college to seek out resources, like, SJ never made me feel embarrassed or like, shameful for like seeking tutoring or like going out and talking to professor's and like talking to teachers about like, things that I wasn't understanding. And so, I think that helped me a lot in college in that I wasn't afraid to go up to my professor and like, talk to them and like ask them questions or like, go to tutoring and like, ask my questions and try to find out the answers that I needed.

Another participant added regarding school culture, "I feel like that was always welcome for, like us to kind of like speak our minds, and look at things differently." The teachers contributed largely to this open school culture that promoted student voice and the development of self-help behaviors. As the participant mentioned, this allowed her to talk to professors in college, something that ten other participants mentioned doing.

Unique to their experiences in high school though, they not only expected help from their professors, they expected and formed significant relationships with them that were much more than transactional. Six participants mention forming mentor relationships with professors in college that went beyond information exchange; they were part of their support network, a person whom they could go to for help and advice.

The concept of supportive adult relationships being promoted at SJ is further seen through who else students mentioned beyond their teachers. Four participants mentioned the significance of either the school janitor, the “lunch lady,” or the school secretary. One participant mentioned the joy she experienced speaking Spanish every day with the secretary, and another identified the warmth in the welcome she received from her, the first person she spoke to as a transfer student her junior year. Another participant identified the influence of the Spanish-speaking janitor in her high school years noting:

For me, the person I remember most fondly is Maria. Um, she taught me a lot. Like, she just taught me a lot about morals and about, you know, taking care of other people. And she was just the nicest and sweetest person ever. And like she always had a lot to do, but she really made me feel appreciated as an individual.

As part of a work study program for low-income families, this student spent many hours cleaning school grounds. The bond they formed because of Maria’s time investment and commitment to work is another example of the adult-student mentor relationship seen consistently at SJ. Like each of these students’ stories, Angie also mentioned significant adults in her time at SJ, the two most impactful being her Spanish teacher and the Ambassadors Society director, both of whom directly informed her college years.

### ***Choosing to Attend a Private Catholic College Far From Home***

Angie “fell in love” with Loyola University Chicago after a college visit her senior year but was discouraged from attending by SJ’s college counselor who advised her to consider applying to other more affordable in-state schools. Angie had visited Loyola as part of an East Coast college tour her oldest *primo*, who was also her godfather, had invited her on. He was the college counselor at the local brother school to SJ, and Loyola was a special addition to the list of college visits made for his goddaughter. Significantly, this cousin was also the first cousin to attend college in the family. She noted, “He was able to guide the rest of us cuz’ my *tíos* and *tías*

don't speak proper English. So once one cousin did it, they became the one that helped everyone." Reflecting on the tour, Angie said of Chicago, "I fell in love with it right away," and added she was not expecting to feel strongly about Loyola but once on campus, "It felt so right," and, "I think that it just was the exact same feeling I had when I got to SJ." When she returned, she was frustrated by the advice of the college counselor who emphasized tuition costs, out-of-state living, and student debt. She felt her dream school was being dismissed. Uncertain what to do and frustrated, she again relied on advice from those in her family who had gone before her and the support of her parents.

***Familial and Navigational Capital: The Stories of Those Who Have Been There Before***

Her parents were supportive and together they rallied against the counselor's advice, but lacking insight they told her, "She has to ask for advice and figure this out." She described turning to her cousins and mentioned significant input from an uncle-in-law who had moved from Mexico to attend the University of Wisconsin and became a doctor. She told the story of his advice at a family event, "He sat me down and shared with me his story about going to school in Wisconsin and [how] he was able to do it [and] that I shouldn't have that fear." He justified the fear, explaining his similar fear in taking on debt but how he "had to follow his dreams." Even though she received a half scholarship, the debt numbers were daunting and without the story and encouragement of her *tío*, a successful doctor, she might not have ended up at Loyola where she thrived. This example of navigational capital is particularly salient because as more Latina/o students receive postsecondary degrees, the nature of Mexican families that operate as information networks, will help more students like Angie end up at the school that suits them best.

### ***A Marketing Major: Prepared and Under Prepared***

Angie was a Marketing major at Loyola and graduated in four years, despite initial setbacks resulting from under preparedness in math. Expecting to “be placed in Calculus,” based on a math entrance exam she was placed in Fundamental Math which placed her “behind three semesters” given this new math track. To circumnavigate having to “retake a ton of math,” she took large course loads senior year.

In other courses, Angie drew upon her culture and her high school leadership experiences to her benefit and that of others. Her experience as Ambassadors’ president was extremely helpful in her marketing group projects, especially when the task was targeting diverse populations. In reflecting on the impact of Ambassadors on her college marketing projects she stated, “...if we did this at Saint James, and we were able to get this many people, if we technically like, offered this to a company, they can probably have the same success.” One project where her high school marketing experience particularly shined was when the class was tasked with helping a local Chicago school reach a more diverse population. She made contributions to the group as the only Latina/o that the rest of the group overlooked. Her insights included the need to provide Spanish pamphlets, interpreters at events, and other informational materials in Spanish. The importance of the Spanish language and her cultural heritage added to her perspective as a marketing major and was also instrumental socially as she found her way without her family in a new city.

### ***Linguistic Capital: A Means of Social Connection and Professional Opportunity***

Angie consistently made extra efforts to find fellow Spanish speakers whom she could connect with on campus. Knowing how few Latinas there were on campus, she would listen closely as professors did role call on the first day of class. Making a mental note of all “the

names that sounded like someone who could speak Spanish,” she would find them after class intent on befriending them and speaking Spanish. She described this search for Latinas on campus and the results stating:

Even when I did find them, some of them were just trying to, like, shy away from that. And if you know me, I'm very loud. And I'm very like, no, this is what we're going to do. And like some girls were like, “No, I don't want to speak to you in Spanish.” And I'd be like, yeah, no, that's okay, so I'd like [think] well, this is not somebody that I want to really associate myself with because I was so used to just being able to talk to anyone in Spanish, just like looking left and right and just being able to communicate with them. But luckily, I did find people on campus.

Coming from a majority Spanish speaking high school community where Angie “loved speaking Spanish,” this effort to connect and meet Latinas was her intentional search for her community, her people. She continued her search in other significant cultural spaces: she joined Latinx clubs, studied abroad in Rome where she met and became close friends with other Spanish speakers also studying abroad, and Catholic mass became a major point of connection and socialization for her. There she described “meeting all these different Latinas” who she would get to know on a deeper level through social events after and before mass. Her experience seeking out church during college because it was a place of cultural flourishing and connection was mentioned by other participants as well. Again, showing the overlap of various forms of cultural capital: linguistic, social, spiritual, and navigational.

Angie also utilized the formal Spanish-speaking skills she learned in high school to gain employment and to give back to her community. She revered her high school Spanish teacher, Mrs. Ramirez, and credited her with providing her discipline early in high school and formal training to speak “proper formal Spanish” that she had never experienced before even as a native speaker. This training allowed her to naturally transition in and out of informal and formal Spanish, a valuable skill she described this way, “And so now, when I show up to like court, or



like even in retail, when I've had to, like switch back and forth between languages, my brain has to quickly translate my script that I usually say in English and quickly translate everything in Spanish.” This skill was crucial for her as a translator with an immigration law firm where she would appear before the judge with a non-Spanish speaking attorney and the firm’s Spanish-speaking clients. In addition to all document translation, she would “translate the communication that was happening between the judge, [the] attorney, and my clients, making sure that all that communication was coherent.” Naturally, these were high stakes communications with potential deportation hanging in the balance, but Angie described being very successful in these spaces because of the formal Spanish training she had received.

### ***Linguistic Capital as Social and Navigational Capital for Latinas***

Like Angie, speaking Spanish with other Latinas on campus was instrumental for other participants as well as it formed a connection point that allowed them to quickly make friends and feel comfortable. Going back to the first interviewee, Jasmine, she described her Spanish conversations with her *hermanas* within *Hermanas Unidas* saying:

Somebody might just start talking Spanish out of nowhere because it'll be like, I could say it in English, but I just know how to say it better in Spanish. And then, like, you just understand and get them in a sense, because sometimes my thoughts come in Spanish.

The culture shock Jasmine experienced upon entering college was counteracted by the connections she began forming with Latinas and through the Spanish language, much like what Angie was doing. Like Jasmine and Angie, eight other participants identified culture shock as a challenge and relied on social and linguistic capital to find Latinas on campus to establish support networks. Forming *mutualistas*, as described in Ale’s narrative, was essential in navigating postsecondary education. Latinas in this study were drawn to these community

networks because they gravitated to Latinas on campus whom they identified with. As proud Latinas, they wanted to surround themselves with like-minded women.

***Being a “Proud Latina”: The Cultural Legacy of Families Who Choose to Send Their Daughters to Saint James***

As seen throughout this study, postsecondary institutional diversity continues to present a major challenge for Latinas who find themselves in college classes and on campuses where all too often they are the lone Brown woman in a room. College campuses need to continue to address this issue and make greater strides to increase institutional diversity. Although the number of Latinas has increased in the past decade, especially at California institutions, the nature of this gradual change makes addressing the issue a key priority for majority Latina schools. At SJ, graduates are clearly experiencing social challenges related to institutional diversity and as such it is essential for the school to make changes to address the issue (some recommendations on this topic will be presented in chapter five). But the same reality, being a majority Latina school, also served as a significant source of pride that helped many participants navigate White spaces over time and be proud of their Latina heritage, culture, and all that it entails.

Angie, Sam, Jasmine, and other participants all detailed the significant role their high school experiences had in helping them develop a “proud Latina” identity. This identity acted as a form of aspirational capital and helped them move confidently through spaces, whether immediately or over time, to overcome challenges. Angie spoke to this important reality explaining what campus was like after returning from studying abroad where she met two Latinas who become her close friends:

...it was just like, an amazing feeling for all three of us to like, come together and be in this like insanely White and affluent institution and just like, be Brown and like,

loud and proud about it. And like, yeah, it was it was definitely something that I needed to find at school in order to get some kind of center of gravity in this like new crazy world that I'd found myself in.

The “crazy world” she found herself in being her White institution that varied significantly from both her high school and her native Los Angeles. Others not as far from home, described their similar feelings. One participant attending the University of California, San Diego extrapolated:

So I think one of the major things that SJ prepared me for was, like kind of embracing, like, and being proud of me being Latina. I kind of already had a little bit of a background because my parents are both Mexican and they're very much, you know, proud to be it. But I think being a part of a small school, like less than 300 girls, like 99%, Latina, everyone knows the language, like, no one's shy about it either, like, we all did and we probably still do, like, embrace it. So I think taking that that and applying it here, like if I had been anywhere else, I think in high school, I don't think I would have been like... because I struggled like my first year here. But it wasn't about me like being embarrassed that I was Latina. It was more about me like on an academic base. But I feel like if I didn't have that background, and I was one of the only Latinas that I saw around that would have had a pretty negative impact on my first and probably like the rest of my college years. I think that's what it [SJ] helped me prepare for and I feel like that's more important than anything else.

Perhaps it is more important than anything else because Latinas from SJ are very aware of the numbers stacked against them in higher education and what it means to graduate as a Latina in postsecondary education. They are proud to be Latina and proud of what they accomplish as Latinas in postsecondary education.

Undoubtedly, as underscored throughout this chapter, family is also super critical in this “proud Latina” identity, and those parent(s) choose to send their daughter to SJ because they know that the school does, and will continue to, nurture their development as a proud Latina. Although many parents and daughters will not share the realities of college, they will share the lived experiences of being a proud Latina or Latino. Another major reason parent(s) or guardian(s) send their children to SJ is because they graduate and go onto college where based on the participants in this study, they are finding success.

### ***Defying the Numbers: Graduating from College at High Rates***

Another significant challenge that students identified consistently throughout the study were the numbers stacked against them as Latinas in postsecondary education. In Angie's focus group, three participants had already graduated and two were still in college. Each of the three who had graduated mentioned that achievement as something they were extremely proud of. Angie described her understanding of the odds stacked against them and the significance of their accomplishment stating, "We were a full-on Latina school, Latinx, and to just even be able to say that we graduated from college is just a highlight of it all because not a lot of girls have the opportunity to say that." Of the fourteen participants in this study, eleven were first-generation college students by the definition of not having a parent who graduated from college. Of those eleven, four transferred from community college to a four-year university and two of them have graduated and the other two are on track to; four have graduated from a four-year university; one received her associates and chose to stop; and two students attended four-year universities and are progressing toward graduation soon. SJ graduates high numbers of first-generation students and many (both community college and four-year university students) graduate with postsecondary education degrees.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

This study was guided by the seven tenets of Community Cultural Wealth. This framework served as an intersecting analytical tool that allowed me to identify themes and patterns (Yosso, 2005; Perez Huber, 2009). Like other CCW research, this study viewed and analyzed student experiences within the scope of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and placed the experiences of Students of Color within a context of systemic racism (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). Because institutions have been shaped by dominant White culture and epistemologies, each of the narratives within this study serves as a counternarrative (Yosso & Solórzano, 2002). These counternarratives fill an important gap in the research as their stories are all too often untold. In addition to furthering research gains made using the CCW framework, this study provided data that directly benefits the school site in the study and others like it. Additionally, the study's findings benefit Latinas in secondary and postsecondary education generally and postsecondary institutions that want to adapt, change, and grow.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the findings relevant to each of the three research questions. The findings for the first two research questions are presented along with an analysis of the differences identified between community college and four-year university students. Findings for the third research question combine the different CCW tenets to emphasize the overlap and intersectionality that occurs for all tenets. The chapter concludes with a limitations section followed by specific recommendations for the school site based on the study's findings.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

### *Research Question One:*

The first research question asked participants to explore the successes they experienced in college. The question intentionally separates participants into two groups: community college and four-year university students. This was done to determine what differences exist, if any. Participants described their high school and college experiences to determine connections between the two and the impact their unique high school experience had on their postsecondary education. The following is a discussion of related findings.

### ***Success Forming Adult Mentor Relationships in High School and College***

The prevalence of positive adult-student relationships at SJ was a significant source of social and navigational capital that led to participant success once in college. This finding is consistent with other research on underrepresented students (Aldana, 2012; Contreras, 2016; Garcia, 2017) that also found the formation of adult-student mentorships to be exceptional at low-income Catholic high schools. Although the benefits of extracurriculars, particularly sports and leadership opportunities, is well documented at all-boys low-income Catholic schools (Aldana, 2012), the benefits of such opportunities at an all-girls' low-income Catholic high school have not been. Further, nowhere in similar studies is the importance of student leadership opportunities and school involvement detailed to such a degree.

Of the fourteen participants in this study, all except one, described having positive adult mentors at SJ as teachers, yet the list was more than just teachers. It included coaches, club moderators, auxiliary staff, such as the janitor and the front office secretary, and administrators. The diversity of staff mentioned reflects the positive school culture captured in the school's enduring theme of *familia*, which infuses *familismo* values like cooperation, interdependence,

and community involvement (Espinoza, 2010) into the school environment. Guided by these values, teachers and other mentors at SJ provided students with support and knowledge that prepared them to navigate colleges “not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). The importance and value of these mentorships influenced the development of significant participant relationships once in college.

Participants consistently formed mentor relationships with professors who provided academic support, yet like high school, these mentorships went beyond transactional information exchange to become important sources of cultural capital. For example, eight participants described establishing relationships with professors who helped them navigate challenging circumstances their first year of college. In addition to professors, participants formed other significant adult mentorships through on-campus involvement with extracurriculars, another pattern they continued from their high school social development.

### ***Extracurricular Opportunities in Abundance: On-Campus Involvement***

When Jasmine was asked if she would have taken on the leadership opportunities she did in high school if she attended a larger co-ed Catholic or public school, she emphatically replied, “Hell no!” For Jasmine and others, the small school environment at SJ provided opportunities for involvement across a large range of extracurriculars that students would not have participated in if enrolled at another high school. These ideas are consistent with research on the benefits of small schools (Lee & Burkham, 2003; Lubienski et. al, 2008), but again, these ideas have not been explored for the unique context of an all-girls low-income Catholic high school serving predominantly first-generation underrepresented students.

At SJ, the participants’ involvement in sports painted a picture of an inclusive program that encouraged all students to experience one or more sports during high school. For student-

athletes with no previous experience, the inclusivity of the sports program provided opportunities to create bonds with other students and grow personally, taking on unfamiliar challenges with support. The impacts of this approach were evident as thirteen of the fourteen participants played one or more sports and three participants were team managers. Sports also served as a bridge for transfer students to form connections. Both transfer students in this study cited having positive experiences in sports while struggling to transition overall. Through sports, students were identified as leaders and put in positions which challenged them and propelled them into other leadership positions while at SJ.

These leadership positions came in the form of student government, becoming board members of student clubs, and through the Ambassadors and Letterwomen programs. Half of the participants in this study were a part of student government during high school, and as such they became the designated leaders of their classes and school. They coordinated and facilitated class meetings, ran whole school events, and worked closely with faculty in collaboration for larger events. In addition, the Ambassadors and Letterwomen programs were established as part of a marketing campaign where students' serve as major recruiters for the school. This program uniquely provides students with opportunities to advance their public-speaking and other professional skills. Some years, the Ambassadors program has as many as fifty active members. Similarly, the Letterwomen are distinguished student-athletes chosen because of their strong academics and leadership and they too represent the school as public figures at major school events.

Student clubs were another avenue where participants experienced leadership and formed connections beyond the classroom with teachers and peers. Participants mentioned a wide array of clubs on campus including *Anime*, *Cooking*, *Empowering Hermanas*, *ServeAlways*,



Barristers, Praise Night, Fashion, and Girls Who Code. Each participant in this study was involved with at least one club with the majority being involved in multiple.

Participants who were extremely involved in school leadership, sports, and clubs consistently replicated this experience once in college. For example, Jasmine and one other participant who participated in student government became board members with their campus chapter of *Hermanas Unidas*. Angie described replicating her high school experience in college which included similar involvement levels on her college campus with multiple student clubs and organizations. Other participants spoke of their involvement in major-related clubs that helped them network and form study groups in college. Even in some instances where culture shock delayed participants' on-campus involvement, it was their eventual involvement in campus clubs and organizations that provided them with the social and navigational capital needed to move forward. These findings confirm that students at SJ used their social capital to form mentor relationships with adults in college and to establish a positive social network through on-campus involvement.

Furthermore, they suggest that the first-generation students in this study leveraged their professional networks to provide college knowledge they lacked from their parents. Self-help behaviors, like the establishment of adult mentor relationships, are known skills that continuing-generation students and students at elite universities employ, but they are not skills commonly associated with first-generation students (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Jack, 2016). The participants in this study demonstrate that these skills are in fact employed by first-generation students and that the role of the high school is critical in this process. In this instance, positive adult-mentor relationships and social networks served as social beacons that propelled them forward when they were struggling to find their way. Moreover, the college knowledge of first-

generations participants was gained through on-campus mentor relationships and social connections that mirrored their high school experiences.

### ***The Promotion and Fostering of Students' Spiritual and "Proud Latina" Identity***

Another unique feature of the school that similarly served to provide extracurricular opportunities that promoted cultural capital gains was the religion program. As described in chapter two, *familismo* and Catholic Social Teaching share many values such as loyalty, interdependence, the service of others, and group cooperation (USCCB, 2021; Espinoza, 2010). These values are brought to life by the religion curriculum at SJ that includes four years of classroom instruction, monthly masses, and yearly class retreats focused on spiritual education and self-discovery. Not all students experience this religious program equally, or positively always, evidenced by one non-Catholic student who described experiencing what might be labeled a 'spiritual microaggression.'<sup>5</sup> However, the religious program at large is a unique asset for the school and was denoted in largely positive terms overall by participants, including their leadership experiences through Campus Ministry.

Furthermore, at SJ, the Catholic curriculum coexists alongside a larger curriculum that emphasizes a rich Latina cultural tradition that participants recognized as central to the development of their "Proud Latina" identity, a phrase multiple participants used to describe themselves at different points in the study. Together, this larger curriculum presented participants with opportunities to see themselves and their culture represented in the curriculum. As presented in chapter four, many participants explained the connection between their unique high school experience and their identity as a "proud Latina." They cited their parent(s) and other

---

<sup>5</sup> The participant in this instance described a situation in mass where she was forced to receive the ashes on her forehead during Ash Wednesday Mass. In her description of the situation, the religion teacher made her go receive the ashes when both her personal beliefs and convictions did not align with the event. This form of discrimination is similar to Solórzano and Perez Huber's (2020) descriptions of microaggressions in the classroom.

relatives who played a significant role, but were also adamant that SJ's academic and religious program were critical in their identity formation. Curriculum offerings like Chicano Studies and AP Spanish Language and Literature played a powerful role, along with the art program that allowed students to express themselves through non-verbal representations, mainly through illustrations and drawings, a central component of linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). At SJ, students arrive at school with a repertoire of linguistic and communication skills and the academic program provides them space to utilize and further those skills in their learning.

Chiefly though, it is the school culture at large, not just the academics, that contributed most significantly to their proud Latina identity. The school is comprised predominantly of Mexican American students and most staff members are as well. As one student explained, "everyone knows the language, and no one's shy about it, and I think we embrace it." The Spanish language, Mexican and Central American cultural traditions and customs, and the idea of *familia* permeate the school environment.

As described in chapter two, parents send their children to Catholic schools in part because of the social capital and high graduation rates, but they also send them because of the spiritual and cultural formation uniquely available at schools like SJ. SJ has a long and successful tradition of educating Latinas within the Catholic tradition that incorporates cultural values important to Latino families. Taken together with the school's emphasis on social and racial justice, students are equipped with transformative resistance capital (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that helps them navigate postsecondary education once they graduate from SJ, and as this study shows, they do this successfully.

### ***Persistence and Graduation Rates***

As chapter four noted, each of the participants in this study has persisted despite unique challenges amassed against them in their postsecondary careers. The challenges described in this study are immense: racial culture shock, institutional inequity, poor college counseling experiences, financial limitations of low-income students, imposter syndrome specific to first-generation students, and academic under preparedness in math and science. Yet, the participants in this study persist and graduate.

It is important to highlight the fact each of their stories serves as a counternarrative to dominant cultural theories that compare underrepresented students to Whites and then show them lacking. In this study, of the six community college participants, all graduated with their associate degree, and five transferred to a four-year university with two completing their bachelor's and the three others on track to do so. Of the eight four-year university students, all are on track to graduate, or have already done so, and two have attained a master's degree. With a sample size of fourteen, this study does represent incredible postsecondary success for Latinas from a low-income all girls Catholic school.

### ***Research Question Two***

The second research question operates in the exact same manner as the first but focuses on challenges the participants experienced once in college. Again, the question is divided for community college and four-year university students.

### ***Racial and Social Culture Shock Resulting from An Insular High School Experience***

The transition from a small, majority Latina high school heavily shaped by *familismo* values, to large, mostly White college campuses that uphold capitalist values, such as competition and independence, was a major challenge for participants in this study. Consistent

with Chicana Feminist Theory (Espinoza, 2010), Latinas from SJ utilized bicultural adaptation to navigate unfamiliar, and often uninviting, college landscapes. However, in most cases, this took time. Consistent with literature on first-generation students, campuses were difficult to navigate at first because the participants lacked college knowledge (Fann et. al, 2009; Perez & McDonough, 2008). However, this study uniquely revealed that interpersonal peer relationship formation presented a unique challenge for many first-generation participants.

First-generation students in this study described themselves struggling to make friends early in college because of the culture shock they experienced being thrust into an unfamiliar environment after their time at SJ. In college, the faces of their new classmates and the larger social reality were completely different. Multiple participants described interacting with non-Latina peers for the first time and struggling to form connections. The challenging social reality they encountered along with the larger culture shock they experienced made the first year of college extremely difficult. Consistent with the literature about Latina support systems in college (Perez & McDonough, 2008), participants looked to family members, mainly their parent(s), for support during this time. However, their family and community network that they relied on for support were also sources of pressure.

### ***The Family-Community Pressure Dynamic and the Challenge of Talking to Parent(s)***

This family-community pressure dynamic was described not only by first-generation students but continuing-generation as well who felt pressure from family and community networks to succeed while simultaneously acknowledging how significant both were to them. Consistent with CCW literature (Yosso, 2005; Solórzano et. al, 2005), Latinas in this study turned to these networks for support because of strong ties. Also consistent with the literature, families in this study, together with their community, carried the hopes for their “daughters” to

be forebearers for future Latinas in postsecondary education (Espinoza, 2010). Carrying both the hopes and pressures of their community back home, when participants looked around their first year of college and saw very few people who looked like them, they began to doubt themselves and hopes felt more like pressure, and the fear of letting down both family and community mounted. Afraid of letting down their family and their community, this family-community pressure dynamic contributed to the difficulty nearly all participants in this study had talking to their parent(s) about the challenges in college.

For both first- and continuing generation students, talking to their parent(s) about college, especially any challenges that arose, was extremely difficult despite their strong support. In line with research about the parents of first-generation students (McBride, 2012; Fann et. al, 2009), without exception, each participant noted feelings of strong support and belief from their parent(s). The unwavering belief in their children despite the unquestionable challenges before them speaks to the nature of aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). Yet, despite this strong belief, a natural communication barrier was seen in this study between participants and their parents.

Of note, the communication barrier that existed for nearly all participants was exacerbated for first-generation students whose parent(s) never experienced the challenges of college and thus struggled to relate or comprehend. For example, when Jasmine did try to communicate with her parents about challenges in college, she was met with confusion and a lack of empathy which furthered the gap between them. Like Jasmine, when Sam's mom tried to help her with her college-level math, her best intentions reinforced the fact that her mom could not relate. The result for Sam was a feeling of overwhelming isolation as she continued to try and navigate college by herself. Although both participants would navigate college successfully, their stories serve as reminders of the additional challenges first-generation students face.

For participants struggling to talk to their parents that pressure was even more pronounced because they were acutely aware of the sacrifices and financial resources poured into their private Catholic education that in its very description, a “college preparatory” high school, should lead to them being prepared for college. In instances where they found they were not prepared, talking to their parents about whatever challenge they experienced carried with it feelings of guilt and shame.

### ***Prepared in English but Underprepared in Math and Science***

One of the biggest areas of under- or unpreparedness described by participants was a general lack of preparedness for their college math and science courses. This phenomenon is consistent with recent research comparing Catholic and public-school outcomes (Lubienski et. al, 2008; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2012). The lack of math preparation was consistent across all levels of postsecondary education and was a barrier for various majors, but was most pronounced for those in STEM, which often required participants to take on additional coursework to make up for the learning loss they entered college with. STEM majors noted challenges in the prerequisite courses for their major because of the lack of science course offerings at SJ, inadequate academic instruction, and underqualified teachers in the science department.

The findings from this study also support research (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2012) that has demonstrated how underrepresented students from Catholic schools are more prepared in English and writing. Multiple participants mentioned this as an area of academic strength and only one participant mentioned English as an area of under preparedness. Participants readily willing to express dissatisfaction with their math and science high school courses would also openly share about struggles in English or writing. The lack thereof, and partic positive descriptions, points to this as an area of strength in SJ’s academic program. Also noteworthy, is

the fact that the lone participant who identified English as a challenge in college had been academically tracked during high school and did not experience the rigor and high expectations found in AP or Honors courses while at SJ. These findings support and are consistent with research about the dwindling ‘Catholic school advantage’ for underrepresented students that still exists in English but has diminished in math since 2000 when public schools began pushing standardized testing (Lubienski et al., 2008; Byrk et. al, 2010). The findings of this study also take that idea further, providing preliminary evidence to demonstrate that the Catholic school advantage that no longer exists for underrepresented students in math, also extends to the sciences.

### ***Negative Outcomes Resulting from Academic Tracking and Inadequate and Unequal College Counseling***

In this study, the participant who struggled in college English courses was an anomaly, but her larger high school experience points to trends at SJ that mirror the negative outcomes associated with academic tracking in public school. Academic tracking research effectively demonstrates the major downsides of this widespread practice in public schools, especially for Students of Color who experience lower educational outcomes and college completion rates as a result (Freelon & Rogers, 2012; Condrón, 2009; Akos et. al, 2007). The student in reference did go on to her earn her associate degree and transfer to a four-year university, but whether her experience was an exception, the rule, or something in between was difficult to determine. Exactly what happens to students in the non-AP track is an important area for further research at SJ and schools with similar structures. Nonetheless, the academic tracking did point to other significant trends within the counseling program at SJ.



A major inequity resulting from academic tracking consistent with the research (Holland, 2015) were the unequal college counseling practices at SJ that favored those in the AP and Honors courses. Although an overwhelming majority of the participants identified the college counseling they received as inadequate, students in the non-AP track experienced far worse treatment. Favoritism was the chief factor cited by multiple participants in their descriptions about why AP students received more time and resources from the counselor than others. These practices mirror public school college counseling research that shows higher-performing White students receiving better quality counseling while Students of Color, often in the lower academic track, receive inferior support (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Two results of inequitable counseling practices in public schools are lower completion rates in college and a lack of trust in their college counselor (Holland, 2015).

Like public school students, non-AP students at SJ who experience unequal treatment from the counselor were more likely to not trust their college counselor as well. The result in Sam's case was catastrophic. She never met with the college counselor her first year which directly connected with the academic challenges she experienced. Similarly, Ale who also felt she had been penalized by the counselor for her academics did not meet with the college counselor her first year of college. Students in the AP track reported having negative interactions with the high school counselor, but they all met with and most often sought out a college counselor to begin and plan out their college years. These meetings, and lack thereof, for participants significantly impacted the trajectory of the first year and their plan for graduating in four years. Regarding lower completion rates (Holland, 2015), it is noteworthy that both students would earn their associate degree and transfer to a four-year university. Given the small sample size it is difficult to determine the extent of this phenomenon.

### ***Differences Between Community College and Four-Year University Participants***

Consistent with Sam and Ale's experiences described above, community college participants in this study generally experienced far greater social isolation amongst their peers and with adults on-campus. Consistent with community college research (Contreras, 2015; Deli-Aman, 2016), participants identified their community college campuses as spaces for learning that included a diverse student body that differed from four-year universities. Demographic differences, along with work obligations, make community college a place where socialization is different (Deli-Aman, 2015) which can make forming mentorships challenging. Yet, another harsh reality seen in this study was the lack of support from their high school network, which differed from four-year university students.

This stark contrast illuminates how stigma around community college attendance impacts socialization as well. Whereas Jasmine relied on her high school friends for support and resources, Sam described the shame and difference she felt as a community college student which prevented her from reaching out to her high school social network. For Jasmine and other four-year university students, her peers operated as a source of social and navigational capital. Sam had the opposite experience; without peers to turn to and not yet equipped with adult-mentor relationships, her social isolation grew. Further, community college participants that never met with an academic counselor or advisor could have jumpstarted future connections with adults on campus but instead were left further behind their four-year university counterparts.

Previously mentioned, another heavily researched phenomenon that explains why community college students often drop out, stop out, and take more years to graduate is the prevalence of long working hours that interfere with their academics (Deli-Aman, 2015). The data in this study neither confirms nor disconfirms this phenomenon. The study uncovered that

all participants worked during college, but to what extent, if any, this interfered with their college academics was not mentioned by any participants. Additionally, because participants were not asked how many hours they worked, the study did not determine differences among community college and four-year participants.

### *Research Question Three*

The third research question was designed to explore the various forms of CCW that participants utilized to overcome challenges in college, and to what extent, if any, the participants attributed the acquisition of these forms of capital to their high school experience. The findings demonstrated the interconnectivity and overlap between the different forms of CCW consistent with the research (Yosso, 2005; Perez Huber, 2009) and as such were described in pairings or triads. These groupings emphasize the important overlap and interconnectivity that occurs with each of the seven tenets of CCW.

### *Social and Navigational Capital*

As described for RQ1, social and navigational capital were consistently employed by participants to persist and be successful in college. These forms of capital were nurtured through their time at SJ, especially through the development of mentor relationships with adults who transfer social capital in many forms, but particularly in the form of college knowledge and assistance-giving behaviors (Aldana, 2012; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Participants learned to identify adults as sources of knowledge and emotional support when facing challenges in high school, which transferred to the development of adult-mentor relationships with professors and other adults once in college. Furthermore, social capital, such as self-help behaviors, commonly associated with continuing generation students, who most often are White, was exhibited consistently by first-generation participants in this study.

Although the participants' efforts have been thoroughly documented, the willingness of adult Women of Color to form lasting mentor relationships with participants in this study has not. These women are shining examples of the values that shape Community Cultural Wealth. In outlining social capital, Yosso (2005) explains how:

Scholars note that historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment, and health care. In turn, these Communities of Color gave the information and resources they gained through these institutions back to their social networks (p. 80).

As college-educated Women of Color, the mentors described in this study had experience navigating White campuses shaped by patriarchal, racist, and capitalist values. As such, they provided college knowledge, chiefly in the form of navigational capital, to the next generation. These mentor relationships with Women of Color played a significant role in their navigation of college generally, but specifically with culture shock and imposter syndrome. In addition, they also provided them academic and career opportunities through their own social networks. For example, Jasmine's network helped her obtain a prestigious research internship, and others similarly gained on-campus employment and academic opportunities.

For other participants, race or gender were not considerations mentioned in their descriptions. But like others, they described forming significant connections with professors on campus who were sources of navigational capital. They also utilized mentor relationships with adults for networking purposes, relationships that led to opportunities on-campus that they would not have found otherwise. In addition to adult networks, participants also consistently utilized their peer networks as sources of social and navigational capital.

Consistent with research about first-generation students, participants did not look to their parent(s) for college knowledge and instead relied heavily on their peers, in addition to adult mentors (Perez & McDonough, 2008). Although multiple students struggled to make friends on

mostly White campuses their first year, they found support from high school peers navigating the same reality. Operating both as social and navigational capital, peers provided support (even while at different campuses), sage advice, and shared helpful resources they had become involved with like *Hermanas Unidas*. For many, the transition from a small, nearly all Latina high school to college was difficult, but peer support networks helped them persist and eventually make important connections with peers on their campus.

### ***Aspirational, Familial, and Spiritual Capital***

Because of significant ideological overlap and the consistent interplay of other important groups, such as family, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent SJ was responsible for the development of aspirational, familial, and spiritual capital. The idea of *esperanza* (hope), for instance, is central to each of these three forms of capital and is heavily influenced early in life by family upbringing and values within Latino/a homes, the majority of whom in this study were also Catholic. However, based upon the findings of this study, SJ's school culture and values built upon, and often, enhanced these forms of capital which in many cases began with their biological family.

Uniquely, this study revealed that for the five participants who spoke to their parents about their mental health challenges in college, they were consistently met with empathy, understanding, and love. Although this study occurred during the years of the covid-19 pandemic, which had an impact on the prevalence of mental health, mental health issues have long been a concern and will remain so, especially for underrepresented students who face additional challenges and pressures in college. Although students in this study cited feeling pressure from their parent(s), without exception they described feeling supported by their parent or parent(s) as well. Yet, each of them expressed fear surrounding communication with their

parent(s) about their mental health. When they did eventually open up, none of their fears were realized. Participants who experienced the family-pressure dynamic were relieved once they communicated their mental health struggles with their parent(s). This is significant because it can be used by the site itself and colleges and universities to promote mental health awareness for Latinas and their parent(s). It is critical that parent(s) know the mental health issues their daughters might experience in college, and conversely, for students to understand the importance of family support when encountering mental health issues. Biological family was critical in helping students deal with mental health issues, but extended family played a central role with mental health and other challenges.

As a result of a common consciousness and cultural understanding, participants at SJ identified strongly with other Latinas facing similar challenges and knew they were not alone. The idea of *familia* operates as a cohesive mantra at SJ, which aligns with Yosso's (2005) description of extended family that includes kinship ties with those beyond biological family. This was most evident in the common response participants gave when asked to describe something they were most proud of; the vast majority described being proud of going to college and graduating as Latinas. They were acutely aware of the challenges they faced and the odds not in their favor (NCES, 2020). As Yosso (2005) notes, within communal networks such as these, "isolation is minimized" (p. 79) as families and students form communal bonds and connections. Together, they were bound together in their defiance of these numbers and what it meant to them personally and their community networks.

In a similar manner, aspirational capital was both nurtured by families who sent their daughters to SJ because of their desire for something better, and the school itself which provided them with knowledge and the resiliency to persist despite the low numbers for Latinas in

postsecondary education (NCES, 2020). As previously mentioned, Latinas in this study knew the numbers and what their success represent as college graduates. They faced significant setbacks in their college careers and real barriers to their education, yet they persisted. Their holistic development at SJ which included a rigorous academic course load, opportunities in leadership, abundant extracurriculars, and high expectations for them at a college preparatory high school. Although there were shortcomings in the curriculum and overall academic program, it did prepare them for college. Along with the support and encouragement of family members, the school instilled in them the belief they would attend college, but more than that, that they belonged in college, and that they would be successful there.

Like the research of Perez Huber (2009), this study identified the value of spiritual capital nurtured by family and communities as “powerful resources” that helped participants “overcome barriers and maintain hopes for the future” (p. 722). For some participants, the spiritual formation they received at SJ provided them with practices, such as prayer, they utilized when facing challenges in college. For others, spiritual capital was seen through church community and the social network it provided. Multiple participants described seeking out the local Catholic service on their college campus for spiritual reasons, but also for sociocultural reasons. Participants attended church because it was a place of diversity and culture on campuses that lacked both. At mass, they knew they would find other Latinas whom they would identify with, and they did. In addition, the spiritual component of attending mass was important to participants as well who noted continuing this routine from high school once in college.

Angie’s story, most acutely demonstrated the value spiritual capital has for many first-generation Latinas seen through the significant role her community played in supporting her and her mother in difficult times. Her mother gained the knowledge and encouragement from her

church community that helped her support Angie through depression, dropping out of college, and struggles with alcohol. Ultimately, alongside the help of her church network, she helped Angie get back on track to transfer with her associate degree and complete her bachelors. The college knowledge gap between Angie and her mother, which included knowledge about mental wealth, was narrowed by her and her mother's church community.

### ***Linguistic and Resistant Capital***

Linguistic capital was clearly seen through the social patterns, involvements, and choices of participants in this study who went to great lengths to find other Latinas on college campuses. Again, the overlap in cultural capital forms is evident. Language, which is by nature social, allowed participants to form connections with other Latinas on campus who, like participants in this study, were navigating mostly White spaces. Participants consistently sought out Spanish-speakers through involvement with clubs, such as *Hermanas Unidas*, multicultural sororities, or going as far as meeting as many Spanish speakers after the first day of class as possible. Together, they formed formal and informal *mutualistas* that served as sources of support, strength, and comfort (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, multiple participants also leveraged the Spanish language to gain employment during college and to advance beyond their current employment position. This skill reflected the value of informal and formal Spanish learning they gained from their high school education.

In conjunction with the Spanish language, participants utilized social connections with other Latinas on campus to overcome the initial culture shock they experienced. The common bond shared, points to a phenomena CCW researchers have described thoroughly: People of Color, in this case Latinas, looking out for other People of Color to further their advancement within White spaces. In their shared cultural histories are learned behaviors and patterns that



only they know and understand (Yosso, 2005). Many of these behaviors represent developed patterns for survival and resistance that have helped them persist and thrive at institutions shaped by, and ripe with, systemic racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Resistance, like racism itself, is often misunderstood as both can manifest in subtle rather than overt actions, which taken together, over time add up to a larger counternarrative that actively stands in opposition to the dominant narrative (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020). As microaggressions can be counteracted by microaffirmations (Solórzano & Kohli, 2012), so too can institutional racism be counteracted by acts of resistance. These acts take on all shapes and forms, sometimes overt and sometimes subtle. For instance, the very presence of Latinas in STEM courses, the creation and rapid growth of *Hermanas Unidas*, and the fight of each participant in this study to defy the odds and graduate all operate as forms of resistance.

The transformative resistance work of participants in this study is further evidenced through the larger arch of their college careers and the learning and causes they chose to commit themselves to. As presented by Solórzano & Yosso (2002), resistant capital informed by the motivation to “work toward social and racial justice takes on a transformative form” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). This type of justice work is seen through the majors, volunteering, and jobs of the participants in this study. Of the fourteen participants, twelve majors were identified. Of those, three were criminal justice majors, two biology majors going into healthcare, one journalism major, and an animal sciences major training to become a veterinarian. Like their majors, the participants in this study have chosen career paths that will allow them to give back to their communities and pass on knowledge to the next generation, a central component of resistance capital (Yosso, 2005).

This phenomenon is further evidenced by participants who partnered with organizations, took employment opportunities, and volunteered in ways that promoted transformative change while in college. One participant worked as a translator at an immigration law firm representing people who were undocumented, another student worked as the receptionist at the local parish she grew up in, and another worked as a caretaker for the elderly. Others have graduated and made career decisions, such as working at a Montessori preschool teacher, a youth employment specialist at the Los Angeles LGBTQ Center, and a women's college track coach. While in college, various participants volunteered at hospitals, with youth on the autism spectrum, as a peer mentor with the EOP program, and as a catechist teacher. Consistent with Catholic Social Teaching, participants chose to work with and for marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ community, the elderly, people with disabilities, undocumented workers, and youth. Together, they stand and resist hegemonic systems and oppression through the transformative work they do for racial and social justice.

### ***Differences Between Community College and Four-Year University Participants***

In this study, the two community college participants from the non-AP academic track show lower levels of academic preparedness and social and navigational capital. Reasons for this cited in chapter three included: lower quality instruction, less rigor, and lower expectations. The resulting level of under preparedness differed from that of students within the AP track. The only two participants in the non-AP track were under prepared for all their college classes, including English: a trend not seen amongst AP track students. Beyond this, the social and navigational capital gained at SJ by AP students was also lacking for those in the non-AP track. One result in college was extreme isolation and an early-college inability to form connections with adults on campus their first year. Both students would form connections with adults by their second year

but not before tremendous setbacks: one being kicked out of college and the other failing multiple courses and seriously contemplating dropping out.

Noteworthy, these student's transformations occurred in large part through the support and help of non-campus adults, whereas four-year university students relied heavily upon support from on-campus adult mentors. Whether these differences are consistent amongst community college participants who were in the non-AP track is difficult to determine because of the limited number of participants in this category, as will be discussed further in the limitations section.

### **Limitations**

Even though extra efforts were made to recruit a diverse participant group, participant diversity lacked in certain ways. The inclusion of student voices who did not graduate from college and either stopped out or dropped out would have provided a valuable voice. However, the challenge here was immense because for any researcher it is more difficult to find participants willing to share their stories who have not experienced the same quote on quote success as their peers. The stories of the participants that are included do provide valuable insights to better understand the circumstances that could lead to stop out or drop out, and as such provide strong direction on the topic overall.

Another limitation connected to the diversity of the participants was their academic standing. Although I hoped to include voices representing all types of students from the site, there was a slight overrepresentation of academically high-achieving students. The academic tracks at SJ provide clear indicators of student success and of the fourteen participants, there was only one who did not mention taking an AP course at some point during high school. The various

types of CCW capital students gain from attending the school is abundantly clear, however, whether this applies equally those in the non-AP and honors track, is slightly less clear.

Another important limitation to address is my positionality as a White male. As a White male, it is important to acknowledge that I lack certain cultural knowledge and cultural wealth that the participants possess (Caldéron et. al, 2012). To account for this, I did my best to read the work of various Chicana Feminist scholars (Anzaldúa, 1987; Caldéron et. al, 2012) and to draw upon my knowledge as a teacher with over a decade of experience working with Latinas. As noted, my whole educational career has been devoted to working with Latinas as a White male and although I will always be limited in certain capacities, my openness and desire to learn more about their stories is one of the reasons they chose to participate and put their trust in me. I am deeply humbled by this.

### **Recommendations for the College Counseling Program**

The dissatisfaction expressed by most participants, along with the stories of favoritism, mark the college counseling program as area for improvement at SJ. Student frustrations and concerns should be addressed in a systematic way to ensure equity for all students. Additionally, given the challenges the position of college counselor creates at small low-income schools, other recommendations include ways to better support the college counselor to ensure that they can serve students best. One important suggestion, although challenging given the financial limitations of the school, is to find creative ways to expand the college counseling program and free up the time of the counselor to focus on seniors and their specific college counseling needs. A review of both the practices of the counselor and the extreme demands of their role at the school would provide greater clarity for SJ.

In addition, the college counseling program needs to work in coordination with the administration team and the faculty to address the prominent issue of culture shock and mental health. Together, the site should work to identify strategies that will expose students to a more diverse population throughout their high school years. This could include opportunities to work with males, students of different ethnicities, and students at varying socioeconomic levels. The mandatory service hour requirement is a great tool that could be leveraged to help students gain experience working with different populations and communities. In addition to identifying strategies to promote student interaction with non-Latinas, school staff should also work together with the college counseling department to provide students with information about culture shock itself, potential associated mental health issues that might arise, and the best on-campus resources that will support them through challenges such as these. Leveraging the robust alumnae network to come back and provide guidance on the issue for students individually or through larger events, such as panel discussions or assemblies, could also be utilized. For other additional recommendations and more specific details on those above please see Appendix Item G.

### **Recommendations for Students' College Selection**

The findings from this study reveal that students from SJ are having success in postsecondary education at a diverse range of colleges and universities, however, where students found success and when, points to the need for a reassessment of which college is best for some students at SJ. Of the six students who attended community college in this study, all of them earned their associate degree and five transferred to four-year universities. This in and of itself is a huge success story but within this story were capsules that highlight the important of utilizing resources available to students on community college campuses. For example, Ale was able to

find the Educational Opportunity Program at community college and her experience there with her counselors was excellent, which was the exact opposite of her experience at CSLA. Another student who first attended CSLA had difficulty getting into see the counselor and once they did, they too had a horrible experience. Both students would leave CSLA, attend community college, find success there and advance their postsecondary career.

Because significant and increasing numbers of students from SJ are attending CSU's, specifically CSLA, and not all are finding success there, this is a significant area for further analysis and research. SJ's 2022 graduating class saw forty of the eighty-one students (n = 49%) attend Cal States and of those 17 (n = 21%) went to CSLA (See Table 3 below). Although the findings from this study point to concerns regarding the CSLA counseling program and services, this factor may or may not impact the college choice of future students. However, for SJ students and their families' finances are certainly a significant factor in which college they choose to attend.

College Matriculation Categories	# of Students Attending.	Total % (Rounded)
Total Number of Students	81	100
Total Number Attending College	81	100
For-Profit Private University	1	1
Private Universities (In-state)	7	9
Private Universities (Out-of-state)	3	4
Total: All Cal State Universities	40	49
Cal State University Los Angeles	17	21
Cal Poly Pomona (Second Highest Attended Cal State School)	5	6
California Community Colleges	15	19
University of California Schools Total	11	14
UC Los Angeles	3	4
UC Berkeley	3	4
UC Irvine	1	1
UC Merced	2	2
UC Davis	1	1
UC San Diego	1	1

Table 3: 2021-2022 School Year College Matriculation Data for SJ

**\*\*Note:** The total number of community college students remains consistent with somewhere between 15-20% of students attending each year. Similarly, large numbers of students enrolling at Cal State LA also remains consistent.

In terms of cost, going to community college first and then transferring to a four-year university can save students at SJ thousands of dollars. According to *US News and World Report* (2022) low-income first-generation students pay on average \$1,379 (does not include room and board) and incur \$11,750 in debt at CSLA. Although these numbers seem low, for families with annual incomes below \$30,000, they represent a large percentage of their total income. The same students, first-time, first-generation students could attend East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC), free for the first two years (East Los Angeles College Promise, 2022), participate in the EOP program where they would receive ample support, and then transfer to a four-year university. Based on the findings from this study, the literature about the most important factors in college choice for first-generation Latinas, and the financial differences between four-year university and community colleges I have made several additional recommendations for the school that can benefit students in terms of college choice (See Appendix H).

### **Recommendations for the School Curriculum**

This study identified academic tracking as an area of major concern for the school. As such, it would be prudent for the school to begin investigating the differences in learning for students within each track further. The school site can utilize preexisting measures, such as STAR testing, to look specifically at annual growth benchmarks for student learning and year-to-year learning as well. These measures for both math and reading would provide initial data to compare the two courses. It is my further suggestion that the school create a multi-year plan to become an AP-for-all school and remove the labels of Honors and non-Honors courses throughout the curriculum. Although these labels are engrained in the academic language and

recent history of the school, they do more harm than good. The impact these labels have is disproportionately felt by students in the non-Honors courses who are also likely to not be in AP courses as well. If the site were to become an AP-for-all school that would ensure that all students take at least one AP course during high school. Students with the most rigorous course loads would still take between six and ten AP courses and would not be impacted by the removal of the Honors label in college admissions. As a college-preparatory school, the curriculum for the entire school should be rigorous and not require labels such as Honors and the *de facto* label of non-Honors that students put on such courses. Instead, all courses could include the label college-prep in front of them, with distinctions such as AP and dual-enrollment used only for courses where college credit can be earned.

Another major area for academic improvement based on the findings of this study is the math and science departments. In line with recent research that shows Catholic schools lagging behind public schools in math (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 2012), it is clear that this is the case at SJ. Yet, it also is clear that this applies to not just math but to the sciences as well. This was the most common grievance of the participants regarding their academics. In most instances, their lack of math and science knowledge in high school put them at a significant disadvantage once in college. Although low-income schools, such as SJ, face significant financial challenges to grow their math and science departments, it is imperative that they do if they are going to remain competitive and continue to attract students. Based on the findings from this study, I have made a list of five recommendations that could serve as useful starting places to begin this process (See Appendix Item F).



## APPENDIX

### **Item A:** Focus Group Study Introduction

Researcher Introduction:

Thank you all so much for taking the time to meet today. I am in my third and final year of a doctoral program with UCLA. I am researching the college experiences of Latina/x students from small Catholic schools such as the one you attended.

I am focused on how your high school experience impacted your time in college, which is what our discussion today will be about today. I want you to know that I view us as co-researchers in this process. I am excited to discover things together by sharing our stories.

Before we begin, a couple of acknowledgements: I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me and I hope this conversation is helpful for you and that reflecting on your experiences with others is a good process for you. I also want to acknowledge my positionality as a white male. I do not have a background similar to yours but I care about you, this work, and I want to learn with and from you. That's why we are here today.

Lastly, I know you know me as a teacher and administrator but please know that today I am just a researcher. Please speak freely and openly, using names of teachers or others is perfectly fine, as all names, including your own, will be changed to pseudonyms to make sure you and your ideas remain anonymous.

For our discussion today, we will go through different prompts that I have shared with you. I will also put the questions in the chat as we go so you can refer to each. I will ask follow up questions from time to time to go more in depth on certain topics. Because our time is short and there is a lot to cover, it is likely that not every person will share their thoughts on every prompt. I apologize in advance, know that I value all input and wish we had more time. I hope and think you will enjoy this time, and don't worry about formalities, anyone can start at any time and then the next person and so on and so forth. If you have already shared and you want to add something after someone else shares please do..

As a reminder, our focus is undergraduate experiences so if you are currently beyond undergraduate please focus just on your undergraduate experience. If you went to multiple institutions, you can mention that in your response to the first question. If there are questions that you would rather not answer, that is perfectly fine.

We will do our best to finish up in under 90 minutes. Are there any questions before we begin? Great, let's begin.

## Item B: Focus Group Question Protocol

### [Part 1]

#### Focus Group Prompts / Questions

##### High School Reflection

1. Your name? Where you went or where you are going to school? And a little bit about what you are doing these days? \*\*School, where you are living or working, family, pet, or something else (up to you what you choose to share).\*\*
2. What were some of your reasons for attending Sacred Heart? Was it your choice or more someone else's or both? Perhaps, something altogether different.
3. How would you describe your high school self?
4. Are there things, events, or people that you remember fondly (or appreciate most) from your years at Sacred?
5. Are there things, events, or people that you remember less fondly, perhaps things that you would suggest the school might change?
6. Choose the word that best describes your experience with the college counseling program while at Sacred and tell us a little about why you chose that word:  
a. Helpful    b) Somewhat helpful    c) Not helpful at all    d) Something else
7. What advice would you give the school that would help them better prepare students for college (might be academic or social or other)? Is there advice, or suggestions, you might give the school to improve in general?

##### College Reflection

1. Remind us where you went to college and briefly describe how you decided to go there (if you went to multiple colleges include those as well).
2. In what ways, and in what courses, did you feel prepared for college?
3. In what ways, and in what courses, did you feel under or unprepared for college?
4. What was (or is) your major or emphasis of study in college? Did you (or do you currently) feel that you were prepared for the courses in your major from your coursework in high school?
5. What is something from your college years that you are most proud of? (Could be a success in the form of school or could be something else altogether).
6. What were some of the hardest or most challenging things about college generally?

-----

### [PART 2]

##### Reflecting on Experiences Using Community Cultural Wealth Model

1. What was your biggest motivation for going to college?
2. Who would you say it was most important to that you went to college (you can say yourself here too if that is most accurate)? What do you think made the idea of you attending college so important to them (or you)?
3. When things got hard during college, how would you describe your reaction or response? Where/how would you say you learned to do that?

4. Forms of expression vary greatly from sitting around and talking--sharing stories, to theater or performance art, to visual art such as drawing or painting, or music, poetry, writing, sports, or others. Which of these forms (or one not listed) of expression do you enjoy most? Where or how would you say you discovered that? Were you able to express yourself this way in your college classes? What forms of expression did you see most valued (or most commonly used) in your college classes?
5. How many languages do you speak? In what ways has speaking multiple languages benefitted in you in your life? Are there ways in which you feel it has impacted you negatively? Was speaking Spanish and finding other Spanish-speaking students, teachers, or others important to you during college?
6. What campus organizations did you choose to get involved with during your college years? What led you to choose these particular organizations to get involved with? Or if you did not get involved in organizations or clubs what would you say was your focus more?
7. Who were the people you spent the most time with during college? Were these the same people that helped you the most during your college years academically or would you say someone else (or others) were?
8. Would you say the people you've already mentioned were your support system in college or were there other people you would go to for support (not just academic but for social or emotional support as well)?
9. How would you describe your relationship with your family during your college years? Would you consider them part of your support system during this time? OR Was navigating family dynamics ever challenging during this time? If so, in what ways?
10. Were you the first in your family to go to college?
11. When you got to college did you feel that your campus was diverse and welcoming or something else? If you saw it as diverse, what made it diverse and welcoming for you? If it was something else, how would you describe it?
12. How would you describe your journey figuring out how to navigate college? Did you find people on campus easy to work with and happy to help you or did you feel that you had to advocate strongly to get what you wanted?
13. Was discrimination because of race/ethnicity or gender something discussed at home growing up? If so, who started those conversations and what were they like?
14. Did you experience discrimination on campus because of race/ethnicity, gender, social status, anti-immigration sentiment, sexual orientation, or other? If so, what was your reaction to the experience(s)? How did you navigate through these experiences? Did your understanding or reaction of these experiences change over time?
15. Do you consider yourself a person of faith or spiritual (this might include connections to God, saints, la virgin, ancestral beliefs or other practices or you might not consider yourself a person of faith)? What spiritual practices were significant to you during your college years? Can you provide a specific example? Did you see these practices as sources of strength for you? Please explain or provide an example. When you faced challenges were there spiritual things you did as ways to respond and overcome?

#### Final Questions:

1. What advice would you give or have you given to other siblings about navigating college?

2. Is there anything additional that you would like to share about your college experience that you feel might help further this study?
3. Is there anything additional about high school experience that you would like to share that you feel might help further this study?

## Item C: Focus Group Protocol (Amended Version)

Grant Kinman ~ Dissertation (2021)

Before we begin, feel free to make a copy of this document so you could edit your own version as we go through the questions. It is “view only” in this current setting.

### Focus Group Prompts / Questions

Questions/prompts refer to undergraduate experiences. If you are in graduate school, please answer only for your undergraduate experience.

**\*\*Skip any questions you feel do not apply to your experience or you do not feel comfortable answering\*\***

### Introductions

**\*\*Before we begin, not everyone knows each other, so if you have not done so already can you please put your name and preferred pronouns as your username.\*\***

Let's start with your name, where you went or where you are going to school and a little bit about what you are doing these days.

- What is your name?
- Where did you (or where are you currently) attend(ing) college?
- What are you up to these days?

College section description: I want to spend some time with you all exploring the social, academic, and overall college experience to begin. So let's start from the beginning.

### College Choice & Inspiration

- What or who influenced you to go to college?
- Remind us where you went to college and briefly describe how you decided to go there (if you went to multiple colleges include those as well).

### Entering college

- What was college like for you at first? Was it what you expected, not what you expected, something else?

### Academics in college

- In what ways, and in what courses, did you feel prepared for college?
- In what ways, and in what courses, did you feel under or unprepared for college?
- What do you think contributed most to your success in college? **\*\*May or may not include\*\***
- What is an academic accomplishment you are very proud of from your time in college?

### Social, family, and community

- Who are/were your people in college? Those who you connected with and supported you the most?
- Were these same people the ones you would go to for academic support if needed? Or would you go to others if you needed support for class?

- Tell us about your social world: Who did you choose to spend time with and what organizations, clubs, or other did you get involved with at your college?
- How would you describe your relationship with your family during college?

#### Linguistic capital and the arts

- For those who speak multiple languages, did you have opportunities to use all of those languages in college?
  - Was having opportunities to use a second or a third language important to you?
- Is there a personal accomplishment that stands out to you, non-academic, that also stands out from your college years?

#### Navigational / Resistance

- Do you feel that your culture was represented at your college?
- Did you ever feel discriminated against at your school by professors, students, or others in classes or in other spaces?
  - If so, how did you respond in these instances?
- Are there recommendations you would make that would improve the diversity and inclusion efforts at your school?

#### Spiritual

- How would you describe your faith during college: did it grow, shrink, evolve, something else?
- Was your faith different for you in high school than it is now? If so, in what ways?

#### High School Connections

- Why did you attend Sacred Heart?
- What was the experience like for you attending a small, private high school?
- Were there any specific advantages you feel you had once you got to college from attending a small single-sex high school?
- Were there any specific advantages you feel you had once you got to college from attending a small single-sex high school?
- How would you describe your experience with the college counseling program at the school?
- Looking back on your experience, how would you describe the culture of the school overall?

#### Recommendations

- Is there anything you would recommend that you think would improve the school culture overall?
- One important piece of advice I would give to seniors thinking about college is
- One important piece of advice I would give to the college counseling program at my old high school is
- One important piece of advice I would give to the teachers and administration is

[end focus group discussion]

That concludes our focus group. Thank you so much for your time and your thoughtfulness. I am planning to review the content and look for themes, and I will be following up with an email of

findings and it is my hope that you will take a little time to read them and let me know if I have interpreted what you have said accurately and give me any feedback you see as helpful. Also, I may contact one or two of you to conduct an in-depth interview if you are interested and willing. Thanks again and I really appreciate you all taking the time to do this. It means a lot!

---

## Interview Protocol

Thank you for being here Jasmine. As you have already participated in a focus group for this study I will skip the introduction to the research. I have used your responses to the questions in the focus group to develop the questions for our interview. Our purpose is to explore some of the ideas and themes from the focus group with greater depth.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[pause]

### FG High School Reflection

1. Very good, last time we spoke you were looking forward to graduating in spring, volunteering at White Memorial, working with your older brother sometimes, and doing research. Any changes or new updates you want to add?
2. You mentioned in response to what motivated you to go to college it being your parents and their journey coming to the states undocumented. Can you expand on that some? How important they are to you and their influence on you?
  - a. You also said that your mom went to university in El Salvador and was actually a teacher, I imagine she had to give that all up to come to the states, do you know that story? Can you tell us more about her story?
  - b. What role did they play in you going to Sacred Heart? Was that more of their decision or yours or both?
3. It's clear that in both your time at Sacred Heart and then Cal Poly Pomona you were very involved, let's explore that some.
  - a. You also mentioned you did not get involved at first and it took you awhile, what happened there? Why do you think that was the case?
  - b. How much do you feel your experience at Sacred Heart impacted how much you got involved at Cal Poly?
4. I thought that question might connect to the culture shock you spoke about when you got to college. In reference to that you said two things I want to revisit (1) You said, "There's a lot of white people" and (2) You said, "it felt like kindergarten all over again trying to make friends."
  - a. Let's start with the "white people" - tell us more about that: what was that experience like?
  - b. What did you experience in terms of faculty diversity?
  - c. Did you ever experience discrimination on campus or would you describe what you went through in a different way?
  - d. Then, let's unpack the "trying to make friends" piece, what made making friends difficult at first?



- e. It seems fair based on the rest of what you shared in the focus group to conclude that has changed. Is it accurate to say that you have made friends now? What changed?
5. I think this is a good segway to giving you a chance to expand on Hermanas Unidas. How did you connect with this organization? What has being involved with this club meant for you?
- a. You also mentioned when we talked about the importance of Spanish that sometimes you would have conversations in Spanish with your hermanas. What was that like? Was it intentional or did it just happen? What went down?
  - b. Another important woman you mentioned was the coordinator for Hermamas Unidas who was also your biology advisor, the one who would be playing some Bad Bunny when you would go in. Tell us more about her and your connection you formed with her.
  - c. Was she Latina as well?
6. When asked about things or people you appreciated in high school you mentioned: The importance of Ms. ----- and lessons she taught you, like and I quote, “well if you have questions, go ask.” Can you talk more about the importance of her generally and that lesson in particular?
- a. You also talked about the special bond that you created with so many students and how you liked to talk to everyone and “group hop.” What role did the culture of the school play in this? Do you feel this was just in your nature and you’d do this anywhere or do you feel the school played a role in your friendly nature?

### College Reflection

2/3. When we began to talk about college and your major in the focus group you mentioned that because you lacked a strong foundation in science you struggled.

- 2. You talked about a professor, Hirakawa, and how important she was in helping you get back on track? Can you tell us more about her and your relationship with her?
- 3. You also talked about a similar experience in just going up and talking to a professor about her cancer research and one thing leading to another and her asking you to do research. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about this:
  - a. One: how is the research going?
  - b. Two: do you think gender had anything to do with the connections you would make in college? Was making connections or working with female or male professors different for you? One easier than the other?
  - c. Were you nervous to go in and talk with him (Dr. Kageyama) at first or how did you approach that?

### Reflecting on Experiences Using Community Cultural Wealth Model

8A. In exploring the people who were your support system in college you talked about your Hermanas but when asked if those were the people you studied with you, you said that would be

other friends in your medical chapter. Tell us more about them and how those study groups formed?

11. When we discussed family dynamics, you mentioned that COVID actually really helped your parents relate and understand what it was like for you in college. Do you think without at home learning that would have happened?

a. What do you think it would have taken to get them to understand? Or do you feel it is more likely that they just probably wouldn't have?

14. When we discussed the question around spirituality and faith you did not answer that in the focus group so I wanted to conclude here.

a. How would you describe the role faith has played in your college journey?

b. Has your faith changed since college (modify as needed)?

During the interview:

- Have you stayed friends with people from high school? How have they impacted your high school journey?
- When things get tough, like they have in college, and they will in medical school where would you say your hope or your drive comes from?

### **Item E – Email Invitation to Participants**

Hope you are well! I am reaching out in the hopes that you might be interested in partnering with me and being a part of my Dissertation research. I am currently working on my Doctorate of Educational Leadership at UCLA and I am recruiting students to be a part of the study.

We would begin toward the end of summer or beginning of fall 2021 and we will find times that work with everyone's schedule. There will be small tokens of my appreciation to everyone who participates in the form of a \$10 gift card (sorry I cannot do more, wish I could).

The main question I am seeking to explore with participants is: What has your college experience been like?

What this would involve is:

- 1) Filling out a short questionnaire (10-15 min)\*\*
- 2) Participating in a Discussion (Focus) Group (60-90 min)
- 3) Possibly doing an interview after the Focus Group (60-90 min)

If you are interested and available reply to this email letting me know:

- 1) Yes, I am interested
- 2) Copy and paste the description of where you are at in your educational journey currently:
  - I am still in school and am currently at (fill in the school name)
  - I finished my Associate's degree and chose to no longer attend school
  - I did not elect to finish my community college credits and have been doing other things.
  - I transferred after community college and have received my bachelor's degree.
  - Other: please describe.

If you are not interested or available, I understand BUT if you know of others who you think might be interested, please email me or connect me with them.

\*\*The initial survey concept was altered and not included in the final methods design

**Item F – Recommendations for the Math and Science Departments**

- 1) Gradually expand the number of course offerings within the science and math departments. Begin with the addition of science electives and explore the opportunity to bring more rigor to the department through Advanced Placement courses.
- 2) Knowing financial resources are limited, explore ways to incentivize the retention of math and science teachers such as grants or networking with large Catholic donors.
- 3) Utilize available data (STAR) to identify the most needed skill development for students and begin revising and creating long term planning documents within both the math and science departments.
- 4) Explore additional course offerings for the dual immersion program through the local community college and advertise the program to all students, encouraging students to take college courses earlier in high school.
- 5) Begin small grade-level, or content specific, case studies to determine the difference in performance associated with the different academic tracks. Revisit the data consistently and assess alternative options to academic tracking that includes designations such as “Honors” and “non-Honors.”

**Item G – Recommendations for the College Counseling Program**

- 1) Create a systematic intake process that provides each student with individual one-to-one counseling before additional appointments are made.
- 2) Partner with alumnae willing to return to campus to speak about their college experiences. This could be a whole school event or specific for seniors before they graduate.
- 3) Provide greater administrative support for the college counselor including additional financial resources, interns, monthly meetings or check ins, collaborations with teachers on college materials, and professional development trainings.
- 4) Reduce the number of additional duties that the college counselor partakes to allow for greater concentration on college counseling and support for seniors.
- 5) Review the central findings of this study together with the whole staff with a focus on student successes in college and the reasons why.
- 6) Use the findings of this study to incorporate more social emotional learning in the classroom instruction of all teachers to address important issues around mental health. In addition, coordinate with administration and available school counseling programs to identify and provide greater support for students experiencing mental health challenges in high school.
- 7) Provide college nights for parents that include ways to support their daughter best and tools to promote open communication between them while she is in college.

**Item H** – Recommendations for Students’ College Selection

- 1) Conduct further research at SJ concerning student experiences at the various CSUs including specific research about the experiences of students at CSLA. This is especially critical given the high number of students matriculating to CSLA and concerns regarding their college counseling program.
- 2) In coordination with ELAC, continue to grow the dual immersion program and expand the number of community college course offerings available to students.
- 3) Create informational materials about available resources at Cal State campuses and materials about critical skills to help navigate large college campuses.
- 4) Engage students who plan to attend Cal States with the prospect of tuition free community college and an associated cost-benefit analysis. Include information about transferring from community college to four-year universities and the connected data that shows the higher graduation rates for Latinas at more selective universities they could transfer to.
- 5) For students electing to attend CSUs, provide them the most important resources connected with Latina student success, including first-generation resources such as EOP, information about multicultural sororities and clubs, specifically *Hermanas Unidas* and major-specific clubs.

## References

- Akos, P., Lambie, G. W., & Gilbert, K. (2007). Early adolescents' aspirations and academic tracking: an exploratory investigation, *Professional School Counseling*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0701100108>
- Aldana, U. (2012). College dreams, corporate work study, brotherhood and belonging: How urban Catholic high schools structure opportunity for low-income Latino and African American male youth. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Los Angeles]
- Alemán E. J., Delgado-Bernal, D., & Cortez, E. (2015). A Chican@ Pathways Model of Acción: Affirming the Racial, Cultural and Academic Assets of Students, Families and Communities. University of Utah.  
<https://amaejournal.utsa.edu/index.php/AMAE/article/view/167/158>
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands – La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA. Aunt Lute.
- Bathgate, K., Colvin, R.L., & Silva, E. (2011). Striving for student success: A model of shared accountability. Washington, DC: Education Sector.
- Belfield, C. & Levin, H. M. (2007). The price we pay: Economic and social Consequences of inadequate education. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Britton, T., Simms, M. & Paul, V. (2020). Early Birds: An Exploration of Early College

- Initiative High Schools in New York City and College Persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention*.
- <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1521025120924782>
- Burks, L. (1994). Ability Group Level and Achievement. *School Community Journal*, 4, 11-24.
- Byrk, A. S., Lee, V., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Byrk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, S., Luppescu & Easton J. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- California Community Colleges (2021). State of the System Report.
- <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Vision-for-Success/sos-reports>
- California State University—Los Angeles (2022). *US News and World Report*.
- <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/california-state-university-los-angeles-1140>
- The California State University, Office of the Chancellor (2022). High School Success.
- <https://partners.dashboards.calstate.edu/hs/search>
- Carbonaro, W. & Covay E. (2010). School Sector and Student Achievement in the Era of Standards Based Reforms. *Sociology of Education*.
- <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040710367934>
- Carnevale, A. P., & Strohl, J. (2011). Our Economically Polarized College System: Separate and Unequal. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 58(6), B32–B35.
- Catholic Church, (1940). *Rerum novarum: Encyclical letter of Pope Leo XIII on the condition of labor*. New York: Paulist Press.



- Ceja, M. (2000). Making Decisions about College: Understanding the Information Sources of Chicana Students. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED448669.pdf>
- Cibulka, J. G., O' Brien, T. J., & Zewe, D. (1982). Inner City Private Elementary Schools: A Study. Milwaukee, WI. Marquette University Press.
- Coleman, J., Hoffer, T., & Kilgore, S. (1982). Cognitive Outcomes in Public and Private Schools. *Sociology of Education*, 55(2), 65-76. doi:10.2307/2112288
- Committee on Health, Education, Labor, And Pensions United States Senate (2012). For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard The Federal Investment And Ensure Student Success.
- Conchas (2006). *The Color of Success: Race and High-Achieving Urban Youth*. Teacher's College, Columbia University. New York & London.
- Condron (2009). Social Class, School and Non-School Environments, and Black/White Inequalities in Children's Learning. *American Sociological Review*. 74:5, 683-708
- Contreras, F. (2016). Latino students in Catholic postsecondary institutions. *Journal of Catholic Education*. 19:2, 81-111.
- Contreras, F., & Contreras, G. J. (2015). Raising the Bar for Hispanic Serving Institutions: An Analysis of College Completion and Success Rates. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 14:2, 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192715572892>
- Constitutional Rights Foundation (2022). BRIA 23 2 c Mendez v Westminster: Paving the way to school desegregation. <https://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-23-2-c-mendez-v-westminster-paving-the-way-to-school->

desegregation#:~:text=The%20school%20boards%20decided%20against,California%20u  
nder%20its%20current%20laws

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Fifth edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Cuellar, M. (2018). Creating Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Emerging HSIs: Latina/o College Choice at 4-Year Institutions, *American Journal of Education*, 125:2  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/701250>

De la Rosa, D., Luna, M., Tierney, W. G. (2006). Breaking through the Barriers to College: Empowering Low-Income Communities, Schools, and Families for College Opportunity and Student Financial Aid.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498745.pdf>

Delgado-Bernal, D., Alemán E., & Garavito, A (2009). Latina/o Undergraduate Students Mentoring Latina/o Elementary Students: A Borderlands Analysis of Shifting Identities and First-Year Experiences. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79:4, 560–586.  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.01107jp4uv648517>

Deli-Aman, R. (2012). The “traditional” college student: a smaller and smaller minority and its implications for diversity and access institutions. Found in Kirst & Steven’s (2015) *Remaking College: The Changing Ecology of Higher Education*.

Engberg, M., & Gilbert, A. (2013). The Counseling Opportunity Structure: Examining Correlates of Four-Year College-Going Rates. *Research in Higher Education*, 55(3), 219–244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-013-9309-4>

Espinoza, R. (2010). The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and

- School Demands. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 9(4), 317–330.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192710380919>
- Fann A., Jarsky, K. M., & McDonough, P. M. (2009). Parent Involvement in the College Planning Process: A Case Study of P-20 Collaboration. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(4), 374–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192709347847>
- Fialka, J. (2003). *Sisters: Catholic Nuns and the Making of America*. St. Martin's Press. New York, NY.
- Freelon, R. & Rogers, J. (2012). Unequal Experiences and Outcomes for Black and Latino Males in California's Public Education System, *Pathways to Secondary Success*, 5, 1-12.
- Fowler, F. (2014). *Survey Research Methods*. Los Angeles, CA. Sage.
- Franklin, V.P. (2002). Introduction: cultural capital and African-American education, *The Journal of African American History*, 87, 175-181.
- Garcia, M. (2017). Creating a homeplace: young Latinas constructing Feminista identities in the context of a single-sex Catholic school. *The High School Journal*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Gordon, L. (2019). California State University graduation rates show uneven progress, some backsliding: Four-year finish rates vary among campuses, from 9.5 to 52.5 Percent. EdSource.  
<https://edsource.org/2019/california-state-university-graduation-rates-show-unev>
- Greene, J. M. & O' Keefe, J. M. (2001). Enrollment in Catholic Schools in the United States. *Handbook of Research on Catholic Schools*.

- Hallinan, M. & Kubitschek, W. N. (2012). A Comparison of Academic Achievement and Adherence to the Common School Ideal in Public and Catholic Schools. *Sociology of Education* 85:1, 1-22 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040711431586>
- Hermanas Unidas Inc. (2022). <https://hermanasunidasinc.com/>
- Holland, M. (2015). Trusting Each Other: Student-Counselor Relationships in Diverse High Schools, *Sociology of Education*, 88:3, 244-262.
- Jack, A. (2016). (No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University. *Sociology of Education*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038040715614913>
- Jencks, C. (1985). How much do high school students learn? *Sociology of Education*. 58:1, 128-135.
- Kinman, G. (2020). Survey of Twenty College Graduates [Unpublished paper]. Department of Education, University of California Los Angeles.
- Kirst, M. W. (2015). *Remaking College: The Changing Ecology of Higher Education*. United States: Stanford University Press, pp. 190-209.
- Kohli, R. & Solórzano, D. G. (2012). Teachers please use our names!: racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom, *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15:4, 441-462. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2012.674026>
- LA Catholics (2022). Find a School. <https://lacatholics.org/>
- Lee, V. & Burkham, D. (2003) Dropping out of high school: the role of school organization and structure. *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 353–393 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/00028312040002353>

- Locks, A.M., Hurtado, S., Bowman, N.A., & Oseguera, L. (2008). Extending Notions of Campus Climate and Diversity to Students' Transition to College. *The Review of Higher Education* 31(3), 257-285. doi:10.1353/rhe.2008.0011.
- Lubienski, S. T., Lubienski, C., & Crawford Crane, C. (2008). Achievement differences and school type: the role of school climate, teacher certification, and instruction. The University of Chicago Press Journals. *American Journal of Education*. 115:1. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/590677>
- Lyons McLaughlin, E., Simms, N., Begolli, K. N., & Richland, L. E. (2017). Stereotype Threat Effects on Learning from a Cognitively Demanding Mathematics Lesson. *Cognitive Science: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, N/A, 678-690.
- Martinez, R.R. Baker, S.B. and Young, T. (2017). Promoting Career and College Readiness, Aspirations, and Self-Efficacy: Curriculum Field Test. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 65: 173-188. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12090>
- Martinez, R.R., Jr., Akos, P. and Kurz, M. (2020). Utilizing Latinx Cultural Wealth to Create a College-Going Culture in High School. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 48: 210-230. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12195>
- McBride, L. (2012). The Beliefs That Parents of First Generation College-Bound Students Hold to Effectively Guide Their Child Who Seeks A Postsecondary Education. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Nevada, Reno]
- McDonnell Nieto del Rio, G. (2020). *New York Times*. A Growing Number of Catholic Schools Are Shutting Down Forever. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/05/us/catholic-school-closings.html>
- Merriam, S. & Tisdell, E. (2016) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and*

- Implementation (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Millett, C. & Kevelson, M. (2020). Integrating social emotional skill development throughout college access program activities: a profile of the Princeton University Preparatory Program. *Journal of College Access*.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1242568.pdf>
- Moore, C. & Shulock, N. (2010). Divided we fail: Improving completion and closing racial gaps in California's community colleges. Sacramento: Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy, CSUS.
- Mordechay, K. & Orfield, G. (2017). Demographic transformation in a policy vacuum: the changing faces of U.S. metropolitan society and challenges for public schools. *The Educational Forum*, 81:2, 193-203.
- National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), (2020). Catholic School Data.  
[https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic\\_School\\_Data/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic\\_School\\_Data/Catholic\\_School\\_Data.aspx?hkey=8e90e6aa-b9c4-456b-a488-6397f3640f05](https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx?hkey=8e90e6aa-b9c4-456b-a488-6397f3640f05)
- National Center for Education Statistics (2019). Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups.  
[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_REA.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_REA.asp)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), (2019). High School Graduation Rates. U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics (2019).
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), (2020). The Condition of Education 2020 (NCES 2020-144), U.S. Department of Education,  
<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ctr>

- Noguera, P. (2008). Creating Schools Where Race Does Not Predict Achievement: The Role and Significance of Race in the Racial Achievement Gap. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 77:2, 90-103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25608673>
- Núñez, A.-M., & Bowers, A. J. (2011). Exploring What Leads High School Students to Enroll in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A Multilevel Analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(6), 1286–1313.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211408061>
- Oakes & Lipton (2004). Schools that Shock the Conscience: Williams v. California and the Struggle for Education on Equal Terms Fifty Years After Brown. *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 19(2). DOI: 10.15779/Z38959C702
- Orfield, G. (2017). Alternative Paths to Diversity: Exploring and Implementing Effective College Admissions Policies. ETS Research Reports Series, 2017(1), 1–78.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12121>
- Pérez Huber, L. (2009). Challenging racist nativist framing: acknowledging the community cultural wealth of undocumented Chicana college students to reframe the immigrant debate. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4).
- Perez, P. A., & McDonough, P. (2008) Understanding Latina and Latino college choice: a social capital and chain migration analysis. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7(3), 249–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192708317620>
- Private School Review (2020). Compare Private Schools: Harvard Westlake & ██████████ ██████████ of Los Angeles. <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/compare-schools/ca/6037/9/34013/51810#results>
- Ramos-Sanchez, L., & Atkinson, D. R. (2009). The Relationships between Mexican

- American Acculturation, Cultural Values, Gender, and Help-Seeking Intentions. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87(1), 62–71.
- Reem, R. & Rumberger, R. (2008). Student Engagement, Peer Social Capital, and School Dropout Among Mexican American and Non-Latino White Students, *Sociology of Education*, 81: 1, 109–139.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/003804070808100201>
- Roksa, J., Grodsky, E., & Arum, R., (2007). *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*. United States: Stanford University Press.
- Roorda et. al (2011). The Influence of Affective Teacher–Student Relationships on Students’ School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach, *Review of Educational Research*, 81;4, 493-511.
- Rumberger & Lim (2008). Why students dropout of school: a review of 25 years of research, California Dropout Research Project.  
<https://www.issuelab.org/resources/11658/11658.pdf>
- Saldaña (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.) London. Sage.
- Sólorzano D. G., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: the experiences of African-American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*. 69 (1/2), 60-73.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Pérez Huber, L. (2020). *Racial microaggressions: Using critical race theory to respond to everyday racism*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press .
- Sólorzano D. G., Villalpando O., Oseguera L. (2005). Educational Inequities and Latina/o Undergraduate Students in the United States: A Critical Race Analysis



- of Their Educational Progress. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. 4(3): 272-294. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1538192705276550>
- Sólorzano D. G. & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 8:1, 23-44.
- Song, M. & Zeiser, K. (2019). Early college, continued success: Longer-term impact of early college high school success. American Institutes for Research <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED602451.pdf>
- Stanton-Salazar & Spina (2005) Adolescent Peer Networks as a Context for Social and Emotional Support, *Youth Society*, 36:4, 379-417.
- Stuber, J. M. (2011). *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Lexington Books.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. University of Chicago Press.
- United States Census Bureau (2019b). Educational attainment in the United States: 2019. <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/data/tables/2019/demo/educational-at>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2021). Seven themes of Catholic social Teaching. <https://www.usccb.org/resources/seven-themes-catholic-social-teaching>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2020a). K-12 Catholic Education. <https://www.usccb.org/committees/catholic-education/k-12-catholic-education>
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2020b). Option for the poor and the vulnerable. <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teac>

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2015). Breathing Life Into Catholic Schools: An Exploration of Governance Models.  
<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/k->
- University of California (2020). Undergraduate graduation rates.  
<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/infocenter/ug-outcomes>
- Vera, H. & de los Santos (2005). Chicana Identity Construction: Pushing the Boundaries. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4(2), 102–113.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192704273154>
- Yosso, T. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8:1, 69-91, DOI: 10.1080/1361332052000341006
- Yosso, T., Smith, W., Ceja, M. & Solorzano, D.G. (2009). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Graduates. *Harvard Educational Review* 79:4, 659-691  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m7071>