



Creating a Model of Latino Peer Education: Weaving Cultural Capital Into the Fabric of Academic Services in an Urban University Setting

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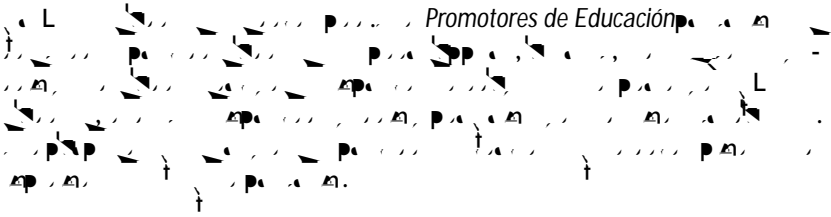
Abstract

Higher education is a critical pathway to economic mobility and social advancement for Latino youth. However, the current higher education system is largely inaccessible to Latino youth, particularly those from low-income and urban backgrounds. This article describes the development of a model of Latino peer education that weaves cultural capital into the fabric of academic services in an urban university setting. The model is based on the concept of cultural capital and the idea that Latino youth can be trained to provide academic support to their peers. The model is implemented in a community-based organization that provides academic support to Latino youth. The model is evaluated using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. The results of the evaluation show that the model is effective in increasing the academic achievement of Latino youth and in providing them with a sense of community and belonging. The model is also effective in increasing the cultural capital of Latino youth and in providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in higher education.

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Introduction

California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in 2005, received a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2006 aimed at reducing educational and professional barriers experienced by the university's growing Latino student population. The HSI initiative, entitled *Mi Casa: Mi Universidad* (MCMU) was developed to provide Latino students with additional academic and service-related support, sponsor on-campus employment, and create Latino role models despite the paucity of Latino and Latino student-focused faculty. Through this initiative, a peer education program entitled *Promotores de Educación* (educational peer mentors) was developed. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the development and implementation of *Promotores de Educación* (PED) program at CSULB. Due to the scope of this article, it should be noted that a subsequent article will focus on the program's findings.

Latino/a Educational and Professional Barriers: A Brief Overview

Over the last few decades, college admission rates for Latinos have increased significantly (Fry, 2011). Despite these gains, Latinos continue to lag behind their African American and White counterparts in 4-year college and university enrollment and bachelor's degree completion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Specifically, the proportion of Latino adults with a bachelor's degree in 2010 was 9%, far less than both African Americans (12%) and Whites (18.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). Furthermore, only 2.3% of Latinos held a graduate degree, far less than both African Americans (4.4%) and Whites (6.8%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a).

Several barriers have been identified that contribute to lower educational attainment among Latinos, including lack of academic preparation (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005), English language proficiency (Soto, Smrekar, & Nekkovei, 1999), linguistic and cultural alienation (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Swail et al., 2003; White & Lowenthal, 2011), familial financial obligations (Erismán & Looney, 2007; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), and a lack of knowledge of U.S. higher educational systems and the financial mechanisms through which to fund college. Furthermore, young Latinos may have little familiarity with the explicit and implicit rules that govern academic discourse (White & Lowenthal, 2011), which may be associated with not having parents with a postsecondary education to help them navigate within a higher education setting (Horn & Carroll, 1998; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Additionally, barriers to education due to low socioeconomic status and poverty have been well established (Caldas & Bankstron, 2001; Ward, 2006). More recently, the economic downturn has had a significant impact on Latino wealth, which declined by 66% between 2005 and 2009 (Taylor, Fry, & Kochhar, 2011). In 2010, 26.6% of Latinos were living in poverty, up from

Need for Latino Peer Mentorship Programs

Racially and ethnically specific peer and faculty mentorship programs provide an opportunity for institutions of higher education to develop more personalized relationships with students and more readily respond to individual student needs beyond the classroom. A study of undergraduate students participating in a faculty student program found that Latino students were more likely to perceive same-race/ethnicity mentors as significantly more supportive regarding their academic and personal development than those students from a different race/ethnicity (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). Furthermore, the authors reported that same-race/ethnicity matching increased student satisfaction to a greater extent when compared to non-matched mentor pairs. Although faculty mentorship is essential for student success, little research exists to determine their impact on academic outcomes such as academic performance, retention, and graduation (Campbell & Campbell, 2007).

Latinos continue to be underrepresented in faculty positions across the U.S. Recent data indicate that only 4% of faculty in degree conferring institutions (including community colleges) were Latino compared to 7% African Americans and 79% Whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Due to the underrepresentation of Latino faculty on college campuses, particularly those in urban centers with large Latino populations, matching faculty to students would burden already overly taxed faculty. Educating sufficient numbers of Latino faculty in a timely manner would also be unfeasible as the educational pipeline for Latinos that extends from elementary school to postdoctoral degrees is riddled with leaks (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000); this is evidenced by the fact that in 2010, only 0.55% of Latinos 25 years and older held a doctoral degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). This situation creates a cyclical, institutionalized conundrum for Latinos since, in order to provide adequate racially and ethnically specific mentorships for Latino students to improve their academic attainment, there must be a dramatic increase in the representation of Latino faculty. However, an increase in the representation of Latino faculty is unlikely given that Latino students continue to have low academic attainment, thus further eliminating the possibility of these students becoming faculty members.

However, peer mentorship programs (Falchikov, 2001; Jacobi, 1991) can provide many benefits to students in general and specifically to Latino students (Thile & Matt, 1995; Torres & Hernandez, 2010). For example, peer

and move beyond white, middle-class culture, to encompass diverse cultural contexts in an academic milieu. Community cultural wealth refers to an “array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). From this perspective, community cultural wealth can be gleaned from six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant.

Types of Cultural Capital

Aspirational capital refers to “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). One important characteristic of Latinos is resilience. Many sacrifices are made within Latino families and communities to work toward their aspirations. For example, Latino college students possess aspirational capital; they dream of bettering their futures through a willingness to learn and to succeed in their academic careers. Aspirational capital is an important element in the retention of Latino college students and plays an important role in the future progress of the Latino community. Aspirational capital is in some ways analogous to the concept of *esperanza* or hope within the Latino community, the antithesis of what could be known as *desperación* or desperation. While many Spanish-speaking communities may not be familiar with *aspirational capital*, drawing its parallels to *esperanza* will most likely resonate as many immigrant families came to the United States after adjusting to varying levels of desperation and hoping for better life prospects upon migration to the United States.

Linguistic capital “includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Among Latinos, linguistic capital refers to their abilities to communicate and navigate through both English and their native languages, most often Spanish. Although language is often viewed as a barrier for Latinos, linguistic capital is very beneficial and advantageous to Latino college students. Their ability to communicate in more than one language allows them to navigate themselves within diverse communities and build on their social/communication skills. Linguistic capital also provides Latino students “multiple social tools of ‘vocabulary, audience awareness, cross-cultural awareness’, ‘real world’ literacy skills, math skills, metalinguistic awareness, teaching and tutoring skills, civic and familial responsibility, [and] social maturity” (Faulstich Orellana, 2003 as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Latino youth are also relied upon by their families to

serve as translators for their parents, or elders, and thus gain knowledge, navigation skills, and experience communicating with professionals such as doctors and teachers.

Familial capital refers to “those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). The importance of family unity or *familismo* is a core characteristic among Latinos. Unlike the typical White-American family, Latino families tend to be larger in size and often consist of extended familial networks. Thus, Latino students experience many opportunities to maintain healthy relationships, communicate with others, and build connections with their resources. In this regard, familial capital provides them with many relational skills that can be helpful along their academic path.

Social capital refers to the “network of people and community resources that provide instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (Aragon & Kose, 2007, p. 118). *Comunitarismo* is a common value among Latinos that refers to the sense of unity and high level of frequent and consistent interaction within Latino communities. This value combined with *personalismo*, or an affinity toward personal relationships, often results in developing social support mechanisms that are needed to offset environmental, social, and institutional discrimination that negatively impact students’ academic and professional development. Other values central to Latinos such as *respeto* and *simpatia* may play a role in social capital as well. *Respeto*, or having respect for and highly valuing the elderly or persons of authority in one’s community and *simpatia*, the desire for harmony over discord, enable social support networks that are often lost due to immigration, to remain ensconced within Latino communities and families long after immigration to the U.S. Latino students are thus accustomed to networking and having a social network in place, on which they can rely for support and motivation to pursue in their aspirations.

Navigational capital refers to “skills of maneuvering through social institutions,” such as universities and other academic institutions, which are traditionally not built nor developed to assist and facilitate the particular academic success of Latino students (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Navigational capital may assist the growth of Latino students’ academic invulnerability, referring to a student’s ability to perform well academically when faced with stressful events and conditions (Alva, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Examples may include technical and relational skills and knowledge such as registering for classes, applying for financial aid, seeking on-campus housing, and purchasing textbooks (Aragon & Kose, 2007). Latino students need to use their navigational capital to get the information they need to facilitate these processes, which may, in

turn, reduce common stressors (i.e., financial support) that have been found to negatively affect Latino academic retention and completion.

Lastly, resistant capital refers to “those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that [challenge] inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Latino college students must access their resistant capital to persevere in their academic achievements, working against institutional and societal racism and the lowered expectations that a legacy of educational disparities often accompanies. Latino parents often immigrate and engage in strenuous work to provide a better future for their children. They may set aspirations that facilitate their children’s ability to attend university, graduate, and have established careers so as to improve their quality of life. Furthermore, “parents of color are consciously instructing their children to engage in [behaviors] and maintain attitudes that challenge the status quo” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81).

University Context: The *Mi Casa*; *Mi Universidad* Initiative

The *Mi Casa: Mi Universidad* initiative was designed to address four key areas: student advising, faculty development, institutional research capacity, and the creation of programs targeting Latino students in need. While CSULB has several programs, focusing on underserved students, mainly those who are first-generation educated, linkage has not yet been established nor has detailed evaluation of their impact on Latino students been conducted. Further, few programs target Latino students exclusively and fewer have incorporated cultural assets and values as an integral part of the educational success strategy. Through the MCMU initiative, Latino students are linked to educational and student services resources to ensure that they receive assistance prior to becoming discouraged with their academic progress, often due to lack of timely progress to degree completion. Creative strategies to

Promotores de Educación Program

The PED program was designed to train first-generation-educated high performing Latino students with the opportunity to work with peers in need of educational and personal support, provide them with tutoring and assistance, and link them with available university services. Although the *promotores* (lay peer educators) model is most often known in the U.S. for health education and outreach conducted in underserved Latino communities, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean *promotores* are also used for marketing, literacy training, in addition to their service impacting health status and access issues.

Requirements for Participation

Each year, a cohort of approximately 13 *promotores* are selected based on the following criteria: A grade point average (GPA) above 3.0; CSULB faculty/staff recommendations; knowledge of, and involvement with, CSULB programs and Latino-specific groups; and, responses in a detailed bilingual screening interview. The PED program is to provide Latino students, many of whom are expected to work to contribute to their family's financial welfare, employment opportunities that facilitate on-campus jobs, while simultaneously providing them with the skills and knowledge necessary to progress toward graduate school. Applicants who demonstrate characteristics as shown in Table 1 are sought to engage in training and half-time university-based employment in the program.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, potential *promotores* are interviewed to assess whether or not they demonstrate understanding of, and appreciation for, the cultural values and characteristics shown in Table 2, several of which were previously explained within the Cultural Capital section.

Utilizing the combined forces of the PED training and cultural capital, inclusive of their personal characteristics and experience and recognition of inherent cultural values, the *promotores* work to provide Latino student mentees with advising, friendship, tutoring, confirmation and affirmation, and serve as network providers to link mentees with needed CSULB services and program connections.

Mentee Requirements for Participation

promotor, and proactively access an array of campus services. Students with a 2.0 GPA or below are given only two semesters to rectify their academic situation, and institutional research shows that no less than 1,000 Latino students per semester are faced with disenrollment if unable to achieve a minimum of 2.0 within the two semester limit. Table 3 shows the number of Latino students with GPAs between 0 and 1.99 and 2.0 to 2.49 for each of the semesters of the PED intervention.

Table 2. Promotores

	D	E	C	Promotores de Educación (ED)
Comunitarismo	A	I		ED, C, LB
Respeto	A	F		ED, respeto
Confianza	B			ED, promotores, confianza
Familismo	Familismo			ED, promotores

(continued)

Table 3. L

	2009	F 2009	2010	F 2010	2011
	8,043 (100%)	8,457 (100%)	7,576 (100%)	8,452 (100%)	8,595 (100%)
B. 1.99	870 (10.82%)	615 (7.27%)	800 (10.56%)	620 (7.34%)	766 (8.91%)
G A					
B. 2.0	1,225 (15.23%)	1,066 (12.60%)	1,269 (16.75%)	997 (11.80%)	1,157 (13.46%)
2.49 G A					
	2,095 (26.05%)	1,681 (19.88%)	2,069 (27.31%)	1,617 (19.13%)	1,923 (22.37%)

Note. G A =

be targeted for services through emails, postings to BeachBoard (the university’s e-learning environment), and other strategies. Following recruitment of students on active academic probation, outreach to self-reported Latino students with GPA between a 2.0 and 2.49 GPA is conducted using similar methods. Until a quota of 100 students is met, PED continue active recruitment throughout campus, advertisements in campus newspapers, targeted announcements in courses with low completion rates, and periodic announcements in Latino-specific campus clubs. Once students apply for and commence receiving PED services, they continue to remain eligible until their semester-specific GPA reaches above a 2.5 for two consecutive semesters. Mentees can also become ineligible if they have more than three consecutive unexcused absences without notifying their respective *promotor*.

Integration of the Model into the University

Given the large and dynamic nature of CSULB, the integration of the PED program required several developmental steps prior to its establishment and integration. First, project faculty and administration worked with human resource staff and the Center for Career Development to create job descriptions and hiring practices that met university requirements, while simultaneously working closely with Academic Advising and Institutional Research to ensure that the targeted groups were those most needing PED services.

Following a year of development and campus consultation, a model to describe the characteristics, recruitment, services, and linkages offered by the PED program was developed and several presentations were conducted throughout the campus community to facilitate a greater understanding of the program and optimize targeting and recruitment of mentees. Using concepts derived from Yosso (2005), the program was conceptualized as a

wrap-around model whereby the Latino student accessing services would be *cushioned* by the cultural, experiential, and personal characteristics and skills of his or her assigned mentee (see Figure 1). The *promotor* is first tasked with identifying his/her mentee's academic and personal barriers and facilitators and directly linking the student to the most appropriate services while creating *confianza* (trust). As the mentee begins to access the services recommended by the *promotor* a greater sense of academic accomplishment begins to develop and the mentee's self-confidence and efficiency in seeking academic and personal assistance increases.

To facilitate the *promotores'* understanding and ease in navigation of

goal of the PED program is twofold: To provide the Latino first-generation-educated student with culturally affirming and relevant mentorship and linkage to campus services, while facilitating a greater understanding and response to the needs of first-generation-educated Latino students among the CSULB campus community.

experience at CSULB, the PED training changed to better respond to Latino student needs. Throughout the duration of the program, the training included several presentations by various student services, such as counseling and psychological services and the learning assistance center, to enable PED mentors to better familiarize themselves with the available services and key staff members from each campus office. PED training thoroughly reviewed both the requirements expected from the *promotor* and the potential needs of the Latino student at CSULB. Due to the fact that the training was provided to the *promotores* twice during the academic year: Once prior to each of the fall and spring semesters, timely adaptation to any changes in the university

cultural context and structural environmental issues in the conceptualization

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