

# Engaging Latino Parents in Supporting College Pathways: Lessons From a College Access Program

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**Abstract:** How can K-16 partnerships enlist Latino parents as informed allies in support of their children's college planning? This article draws on data from 3 years of participant observation to show how a bilingual outreach program for parents at a diverse high school narrowed the information gap about college, enhanced family social networks, and challenged inequities. Latino families gained knowledge and confidence for interacting with institutions, communicating with their children, and easing pathways to college.

**Resumen:** ¿Cómo pueden las sociedades desde el Jardín de Niños hasta la Preparatoria reclutar padres Latinos como aliados conscientes que apoyen el proyecto universitario de sus hijos? Este manuscrito extrae información de tres años de observaciones para demostrar cómo un programa bilingüe de vanguardia para padres efectuado en una preparatoria diversa redujo la brecha de información sobre universidades, mejoró redes sociales familiares, y retó desigualdades. Las familias Latinas obtuvieron conocimiento y confianza para interactuar con instituciones, comunicarse con sus hijos, y facilitar los caminos que llevan a la universidad.

**Keywords:** college access; Latinos; parent involvement; outreach programs

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[Parents who want their kids to go to college should] get involved at the school, find out what you need to go to college, like about scholarships and financial aid. Open up some doors. . . . My mom's trying to help, but I realized she really doesn't have a clue.

—College-bound Latino senior, Pacific High School

It's nice to get with a group and see other Latino parents there . . . that have the same idea as you [of college] . . . so that parents struggling with their kids do not feel by themselves. . . . When I got into this program and I saw those parents sitting there, it just felt good. It just felt like, ah! almost like a support group, you know?

—Parent, Futures & Families

The struggle for college access is a central concern for Latino families. Although Latino students and their parents hold high educational aspirations, Latinos remain underrepresented in 4-year colleges and universities (Gándara, 1998; Solórzano, 1992). Nationally, they have been disproportionately affected by rising costs and competition in admissions, coupled with diminishing grant-based aid. In states such as California, they have also suffered from the loss of institutional supports, such as affirmative action and adequate numbers of guidance counselors. Thus, the burden of college planning has fallen increasingly on Latino students and their families on an uneven playing field.

Research suggests the pivotal role of parents in promoting students' college going (Gándara, 1995, 2002; Gándara & Bial, 1999; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Jun & Colyar, 2001; McDonough, 1997; McDonough et al., 2000; Pérez, 1999; Plank & Jordan, 2001). College-educated parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES) often play a proactive role in "managing" their children's pathways through secondary school and the college choice process (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Useem, 1991; Yonezawa, 1997). Parents of lower SES may "sponsor" their children's role as students and offer indirect support for college (Clark, 1983; Gándara, 1995; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). Yet few families without a tradition of college going have sufficient knowledge to help their children navigate pathways to college.

According to the Latino Eligibility Study, the single most important barrier to college access for Latino students in California is lack of instrumental knowledge of the steps needed to go to college (Gándara, 1998, 2002). Across social groups, parents are cited as one of the top three sources of college information and help for students, yet most parents hold inaccurate beliefs about crucial information, such as the cost of college (Antonio, 2002; Post, 1990). In a nationally representative survey of Latino parents of high school students, more than two thirds lacked basic information about college eligibility and planning (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). The information gap is especially wide for lower SES immigrant parents who are not fluent in English and who have specialized needs on issues of financial aid, undocumented status, and college life (McClafferty, McDonough, & Fann, 2001). A survey of 50 college access and parent involvement programs in California found that these programs were the main source of college information for those attending (McDonough et al., 2000)—yet most Latino families lack access to such programs.

In the absence of appropriate information and support, many parents unfamiliar with college life and concerned about the opportunity costs of college for their families may construe college as a threat and resist the best laid plans of qualified students (Auerbach, 1999, 2003). Schools, colleges, and programs rarely reach out to Latino parents in meaningful, culturally appropriate ways to help narrow the information gap and level the playing field

for college access (Tierney & Auerbach, in press). As a result, efforts to address Latino access may be missing some potentially valuable players and strategies.

What can kindergarten through college (K-16) partnerships do to enlist Latino parents as more informed, active supporters of their children's college planning? How do parents of prospective first-generation students respond to the invitation? This article examines a bilingual outreach program for parents at a large, diverse high school that used information, support, and social critique to make privileged information about college accessible to Latino parents with little college experience. It shows how the Futures & Families (F&F) program worked to narrow the information gap, enhance family social networks, and challenge inequities in schooling. As a result, families were equipped with new knowledge and confidence for interacting with educational institutions, communicating with their children, and easing students' pathways to college.

### **Family Cultural, Social, and Critical Capital**

Many factors contribute to the troubling gap between higher educational aspirations and attainment for Latino students. Among these are the unequal distribution of college-relevant forms of cultural and social capital. Parents, like their students, are differently positioned in the struggle for college access in terms of knowledge, power, and home-school relations. Middle-class and affluent White and Asian parents come to the task with a "home advantage" in economic and educational resources as well as with an earlier start on college planning (Hossler et al., 1999; Lareau, 1989; McDonough, 1997). They draw on personal experience of higher education and professional careers as well as on broader, information-rich social networks to work the system and advance their children's prospects; their efforts tend to be recognized and accommodated by schools (Useem, 1991; Yonezawa, 1997). By contrast, poor and working-class Latino families come to college preparation relatively late in students' careers, with fewer resources and more obstacles. These parents have numerous funds of knowledge and other forms of capital with which to enrich their children's learning (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Villalpando & Solórzano, in press). They support the value of education and encourage their children's success behind the scenes through *consejos* (narrative advice) and "invisible strategies" that often go unrecognized by schools (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994b; López, 2001; Villanueva & Hubbard, 1994). But typically, these parents do not have sufficient detailed college knowledge from personal experience, social networks, or resources in Spanish to guide their children. As Delgado-Gaitan (1994a) noted, knowledge is power and "parents who are knowledgeable about the school's ex-

pectations and the way in which the school operates are better advocates for their children than parents who lack such skills” (p. 96).

As part of its mission to build a college-going culture for students and families of color, F&F aimed to make privileged college knowledge accessible. It did this by promoting certain forms of college-relevant cultural, social, and “critical capital.” Cultural and social capital are complex, cumulative processes not easily transmitted by programs (Gándara & Bial, 1999). Futures & Families focused on teaching more limited instrumental or navigational aspects of cultural capital for negotiating the K-16 system and on expanding family social networks. In addition, the program introduced parents to the “critical capital” that was the focus of the broader Futures Project. Critical capital refers to the development of a critical understanding of educational inequality and social reproduction that leads to social action to rectify these conditions (Morrell & Rogers, 2002). Each of these forms of capital are explored in the findings sections below.

### **Method, Sample, and Setting**

F&F was the parent component of a small, experimental college access program and ethnographic study known as the Futures Project, which was, in turn, part of an ongoing University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)–school partnership. The data for this qualitative case study were drawn mainly from field notes and transcripts from 3 years of participant-observation in F&F and other parent meetings at the school as well as from a survey and a series of interviews with parents of Futures students. These data were supplemented by quotes from interviews with school staff and Futures students. The study was conducted from students’ 10th- through 12th-grade years, with most interviews during the critical college “search” and “choice” phases (Hossler et al., 1999). In-depth, semistructured interviews with a subsample of parents in their preferred language (English or Spanish) explored their beliefs, knowledge, and practices regarding college pathways as well as their response to F&F. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, with Spanish interviews transcribed and translated into English by bilingual, native Spanish speakers.<sup>1</sup> Topical, theoretical, and in vivo codes were used to explore emerging themes in iterative data analysis, with a focus on the forms of capital evident at meetings. Validity was enhanced by multiple methods and data sources as well as colleague checks, member checks, and analytical memos to monitor subjectivity (Merriam, 1988). Like other qualitative case studies with small, nonrepresentative samples, findings are intended to be generalized to theory rather than to populations (Yin, 1993).

The study was conducted at a large, racially and socioeconomically diverse high school in the Los Angeles metropolitan area that was 46% Anglo, 34% Latino, 12% African American, and 8% Asian American. Equity issues were the focus of reform at “Pacific High” since 1994, with efforts to address the stark race- and class-based divide in student achievement and

postsecondary outcomes. There, as in the United States generally, higher SES White and Asian students traditionally performed well academically and went on to prestigious universities, whereas lower SES Black and Latino students performed less well and went on to less prestigious postsecondary outcomes, such as community college or employment. The Futures Project (1997-2001) combined a college access program for 30 students of color who aspired to 4-year college with a longitudinal study of their trajectories through high school and beyond.

This article discusses the views and responses of Latino parents of Futures students who attended F&F meetings, especially regular attendees and 15 Latino parents who were intensively interviewed, as well as the views and stories they heard from program staff, guest speakers, and other parents at open meetings. Most of the 45 Futures parents were low-income or working-class Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants, with smaller numbers of Central American immigrants, U.S.-born Chicanos/Chicanas, and African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Most immigrant parents had at least several years of schooling in their native country, and some had been to secondary school there or in the United States; several U.S.-born parents had been to community college, and a few immigrant parents had no formal schooling. In addition to their high school-age children, many Futures families had children in middle and elementary school, and a few had children older than 18. All Futures parents attended at least 2 of the 25 F&F meetings. A core group of 10 to 15 families (including a few fathers) were regular attendees, with most meetings attracting about 25 people. Several open meetings cosponsored with Latino and African American parent organizations drew 25 to 100 parents but few Futures parents.

F&F was grounded in the belief that marginalized parents need opportunities for dialogue with educators and safe spaces in which to learn and engage around educational issues (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994a; Mehan et al., 1996). The program's 25 monthly, bilingual meetings from students' sophomore through senior years were organized around college-related topics, from understanding college requirements to demystifying academic transcripts to searching for scholarships on the Internet (see the appendix). Additional themes were geared to the concerns of families of color around access issues, such as tracking, surviving in advanced placement (AP) classes, or dealing with counselors. The Futures team—including teachers, counselors, community liaisons, UCLA faculty and graduate students, with me as a research assistant and F&F coordinator—jointly planned the meetings in response to parent concerns, college planning deadlines, and the broader Futures agenda. Meetings held in the school's Parent Center combined informal presentations or panel discussions in English and Spanish by guest speakers of color with small group discussion (in separate English or Spanish groups) or hands-on workshop activities. Most meetings were facilitated by the school's bilingual Latina community liaison, who was a highly

valued cultural and linguistic “bridge” among Pacific’s students, staff, and parents.

### **Narrowing the Information Gap: Activating Instrumental Capital**

Parents came to F&F meetings keenly aware of their lack of information and eager to do more to help their children get to college and have the opportunities that they had missed. “All the information we are seeing is new because neither of us went to the university,” said an immigrant father. “We don’t know what the process is like” [translated quote]. “I would like to have more knowledge and information to be able to help my daughter, like which university is more suitable and why” [translated quote], an immigrant mother explained. Several mothers spoke of not wanting their children to get “stuck” or “trapped” in community college as they had. Many parents echoed the sentiments of a father who came to meetings because “my son wants to go to college and it’s my job to guide and support him, 100%.” Yet even U.S.-born parents who had been to community college said they felt “confused” or “blocked” in dealing with college information and that school staff “make it hard” to know how to help students reach college goals.

A popular Latino guidance counselor who worked with the program observed,

You have a set of parents who . . . do not know the system and don’t know how to be supportive but want to be supportive [of college preparation]. . . . Then there are some parents . . . that have some knowledge of the system but still get lost within the system, still don’t understand it, or they know the basics of it but they don’t know what else goes on after that.

For the counselor, the point of F&F was to “educate the parents about how to play the game” of college preparation. Likewise, the African American principal told the parents, “We need to make sure that you parents have the same information that other parents do,” referring to the school’s more privileged parents.

According to parent surveys and interviews, F&F meetings were the main source of college information for nearly all Futures parents. The second most important yet not always reliable source was their high school-age children. Not surprisingly, parents with relatively more education had more extensive information networks, through college-educated friends, coworkers, and the Internet (Auerbach, 2001). Significantly, F&F meetings were also the main contact that Futures parents had with the high school. Thus, families urgently needed information about both college and navigating the complex world of a large, urban high school.

The core of F&F programming was building parents' basic knowledge about college in general, college planning, and specific colleges. Meetings were centered on the concept of planned pathways to 4-year college and learning to be strategic about these. Speakers stressed that there were certain steps that needed to be taken or monitored at certain times to ensure access and that certain options were available as a result of these steps. This notion of a pathway was perhaps the single most important lesson of the program for parents. For example, a Chicana mother who had dropped out of high school said the most helpful aspect of the meetings was "knowing that the kids were on track [for college] and knowing what that was. I mean, I always knew you needed certain classes to get in [to college], but I didn't know which ones they were."

Because college information was new, complicated, and lacking in meaningful context for most families, meetings had to convey the basics repeatedly in multiple formats. These included not only conventional informational presentations and handouts but lively panel discussions with people who looked like them, study groups, small group debriefings, and time for informal networking and socializing. Simply presenting the facts was not enough; families needed opportunities to make sense of college information in relation to their own lives (McDonough, 1998). Pacific High students, alumni, teachers, and parents, as well as college and graduate students and college representatives, spoke honestly with the group about their struggles to "take control" of their education, convince their parents of the value of college, choose between community college and university, and pay for higher education. For example, a Latino school outreach worker recalled in a panel discussion, in both Spanish and English,

I was advised [by a school counselor] to be a mechanic like my father. My parents had a 6th-grade education. They couldn't guide me. A lot of parents that didn't go to college—it's hard to teach someone something that you know very little about. But it is your responsibility to learn what is needed. Everyone can go to college if we give them the support that they need.

Parents reported that the personal testimony and stories of guest speakers like him were the most valuable aspect of the program.

Parents were especially attentive when hearing the experience of parents of Latino college students, such as a Mexican couple whose son had just graduated from University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). These parents were frank with the group about their initial misgivings:

Mother: It was difficult to hear he was going away to college. I didn't want him to go far, but I knew we had to accept it.

Father: Since he was little, we tried to stress the importance of studying. Education was always the priority. I was worried when he chose to go to UCSC—

we couldn't afford it, we had to get a loan. But it's paid off because my son has started out working at a higher income than I ever had in 20 years. . . . We didn't know much about what was involved [in college planning]; we relied on the counselors. We wish we'd seen something like this ["College: Making It Happen" video at F&F meeting] when our son was in high school. [translated quote]

F&F parents plied this couple with questions during and after the meeting, conceivably because they could relate to this family's experience. By contrast, they listened quietly to more formal, generic presentations by college representatives that lacked this personal dimension.

"It's the funds that scare a lot of us parents; that's where us parents need help, to meet the deadline dates for our kids," said an outspoken Chicana who attended meetings regularly. "Why do they make it so hard to get financial aid?" wondered a Mexican mother with two older children in community college. Stories helped to calm parents' intense worries about financing college, or at least put these concerns in more accurate perspective. A Pacific High alumnus and California State University business student told the group,

Thank God for financial aid. I never had to pay a cent. . . . My mother wasn't really aware. She would always ask, "How much do I have to pay? Why are you getting this free money?" My parents didn't know [about financial aid] because they didn't come to classes like this.

Parents asked speakers why they had taken out loans, what type of loans were best, and how they had paid back the money. They were surprised to learn that many young professionals such as teachers were still repaying their college loans without facing financial ruin due to their middle-class salaries. In a typical reaction, one parent noted on the survey that after the 1st year of F&F meetings, "I am not so ignorant; I thought money [for college] was an obstacle, but now I see there is enough help" [translated quote]. Another wrote, "I didn't realize there was this much money offered by the government." Undocumented families were able to speak privately with guest speakers about their more limited options, especially prior to California legislation granting resident tuition status to undocumented students at public universities. Overall, even for these families, personal testimony about paying for college contributed to an atmosphere of hope and possibility.

Parents also needed detailed, concrete information about daily college life to assuage their fears of children (especially daughters) leaving home and living in the unfamiliar world of dorms or student apartments. The view of a Guatemalan father was often expressed at meetings and interviews: "Latinos don't like for their children to go far away where we lose sight of them or can't help them if they need it. So to us, it will be better if our daughter goes to one of the closer universities." One mother hoped her child would



choose the state university a few miles away because “she could come home for lunch.” Even if colleges were nearby, parents were uneasy about students’ wish to live on campus. They were rapt at meetings when Futures students described campuses they had visited, from the dining hall to the laundry facilities, and when a guest speaker recounted putting window locks on their daughter’s apartment, telephoning her daily, and sending care packages of tortillas and tamales.

One of the most moving moments in the program was a talk in May of senior year by a Mexican mother of five, whose three oldest children had attended Yale, UCLA, and the University of Southern California. She addressed many concerns shared by Latino parents, in both Spanish and English, to frequent appreciative applause:

There’s always a way to find the money. There were a lot of hard times, but together you will get through it. My daughter and I laugh now about how she ate only beans for a week when she ran out of money. . . . Our family faced criticism from relatives for letting our daughter go so far away, and other people asked us why we were spending so much money on a girl’s education. My husband always told our children that since he would not be able to leave them money after his death, the least he could do was to give them an education because no one can take that away. . . . When you see your children graduate from college, I can compare it to giving birth. I can’t describe the happiness. All the parents are crying. You are so proud of them and all the sacrifices they made.

Including such discussion in parent meetings enabled the families of first-generation students to imagine themselves feeling that same pride at their own children’s graduation.

Through stories and personal testimony of fellow people of color, families learned about options and strategies for attaining higher education that they might not have known about or deemed within reach. This framing of complex information as narrative at meetings helped put families at ease with the prospect of college and with deciphering complex college information (Auerbach, 2002a).

F&F parents’ college knowledge clearly increased over the 3 years of the program yet remained modest compared to parents of higher SES. Perhaps the greatest impact of the program’s attempt to make privileged information accessible was in eroding barriers to understanding and aspiration—as in Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, a sense of what is desirable, appropriate, and possible for “people like us” (Auerbach, 2001; McDonough, 1997). As one Guatemalan mother commented,

This program has really helped me because I didn’t know anything about college. We sometimes think that it is impossible for them to go to college—where am I going to get the money to pay for it?—but it is the lack of information and ignorance on our part. [translated quote]

A Mexican father noted, "Every time I come to a meeting, it helps me since I haven't been through the [American] system. I go away with a lot more information" [translated quote].

Armed with more information and inspiration, some parents were empowered to take small, proactive steps to support college pathways that went beyond their usual focus on behind-the-scenes moral and emotional support. For example, one mother called a college office to contest her daughter's rejection from an Early Academic Outreach Program; another mother who spoke little English went repeatedly to the school attendance office to correct her child's records; and a traditional immigrant father finally decided his daughter could live in a dorm. Many parents echoed a father's report that "we are trying to be more on top of what our son is doing in school" and a mother's comment that the meetings "reinforced what I am trying to do at home to push my child." One mother told the group after a panel discussion, "Tonight, I learned the most important thing is to support the student at home and that her responsibility is to her studies, not to have to worry about the responsibilities of the household" (translated quote); as a result, this parent and others reduced their students' chores. For these parents, new information about college and stories of strategies for getting there led to new ways of supporting college pathways.

### **Expanding Family Networks and Relationships: Building Social Capital**

In addition to building college knowledge, F&F aimed to build social networks and community among participants that would help motivate students to stay on track for college. Like working-class parents of color in other programs and studies, F&F parents had little contact with the school, with college-educated professionals, or with fellow parents who had children at the school (Gándara, 1995; Lareau, 1989; Yonezawa, 1997). The program facilitated three types of social relationships that supported college pathways: between parents and educators, between parents and fellow parents at the school, and between parents and their children.

Stanton-Salazar (1997, 2001) has documented the critical role of relationships with "institutional agents"—knowledgeable, middle-class staff members who can help negotiate school or college—in the upward mobility of "low-status students." F&F meetings represented a unique opportunity for parents to build a modest, college-relevant social network with school staff as well as with professors and graduate students from UCLA. The ongoing, empathetic presence of educators who knew their students and/or shared their families' background engendered parents' trust. "We try to ask what kind of career they recommend, what is the best university, what they did [in their education], so that's how I get experience [about college] and then I talk to my daughter," one immigrant mother explained of her talks

with school staff and other college-educated people. Parents routinely conferred with these institutional agents about their individual concerns, especially before and after meetings or during time set aside for short individual conferences on students' transcripts or financial aid. Although parents seemed to prefer one-on-one contact with staff, they also sought advice during the meetings, such as, "How did you avoid the peer pressure? My daughter is getting teased for being a school girl." Having met staff members on neutral ground at meetings, some parents contacted them outside meetings for more guidance—an unusual step for parents of color at the school. F&F's opportunities for home-school communication and intervention were critical for students whose college eligibility was at risk and reassuring for families worried about the viability of college for their children.

Some of the most powerful encounters with institutional agents were the individual "strategic meetings" that the lead Futures teacher had with students and their parents in junior and senior year to gauge progress and plan next steps toward college. These often emotional sessions became forums for both parents and students to express disappointment and frustration while listening to the teacher's advice. As they pored over graphs of fluctuating grade point averages, with some students near tears, one mother remarked of her child, "I think she settles for being average," whereas a father lamented, "I try to do my best for him. . . . I'm not giving up, but sometimes I want to give up." The teacher also contacted some parents by phone or in home visits to intercede in parent-child conflicts and reassure parents through traumatic points along the pathway. This long-term communication with a teacher who deeply cared about and guided their children—"like a second dad," as one father put it—helped convince anxious parents to let their children go on out-of-town college trips, live in dorms, bypass the local community college, apply to expensive private colleges, take out loans, and otherwise prepare for college and prevent "cooling out."

F&F also eased parents' isolation by serving as a support group of like-minded people. "You gotta have the right group . . . to socialize, have things in common," according to one mother who felt alienated by other parent groups but was an avid participant in F&F. Similarly, the Chicana mother quoted at the start of this article, who lived far from the school and rarely spoke to other parents about school matters, was surprised to find other Latino parents from similar backgrounds who were interested in college for their children: "I find another parent who has the same problem [with her student], so now we're growing together. . . . She's me!" she declared and promptly took the woman's phone number. Parents compared notes on the trials of raising teenagers and keeping them on track for college, trying to figure out "when to push and when to back off" when children did poorly at school. They commiserated and encouraged each other with applause, nods, and suggestions as they exchanged tales of dealing with the school bureaucracy. After recounting the many times she had gone to the school to change

her child's schedule, one mother concluded, "I have more *coraje* [courage, nerve, guts] now" [translated quote] about dealing with school authorities.

Over time, regular F&F participants offered each other mutual support. They shared family struggles, warned each other to beware of financial aid scams in the mail, helped each other do computer searches, and labored through financial aid forms together. They chatted at college fair receptions, a family barbeque, and a graduation celebration that allowed for more informal socializing. These social connections with other families of first-generation students showed families that they were not alone, allowing them to share experiences and plans as they moved through an unfamiliar process together.

Several parents reported that the program had helped them to better understand and communicate with their students—"to know what she is going through right now," as one father told the principal. His daughter commented that coming to F&F meetings "allows my parents to talk to me more about school now because they know more, versus me having to go through everything [such as reviewing college preparation information] with them." Another student noted that the program had given her father insight into problems at the school so that "he understands where I come from sometimes when I get mad." F&F facilitated parent-child communication at a tense phase in family life by giving them more common points of reference and offering parents glimpses into academia and the sociology of education that students were studying. Parents began to visualize their children as college students as a result of hearing them give polished oral presentations on their research projects at F&F meetings, UCLA symposia, and education conferences. "I had never heard my child talk like that before!" marveled one mother.

The program's promotion of stronger ties among parents and educators, fellow parents, and their children was a modest way to enhance parents' social capital for the task of college pursuit. On a smaller scale, it mirrored the broader Future Project's promotion of students' social capital through clustering in advanced placement (AP)/honors classes and the encouragement of study groups (Serna & Collatos, 2001). Just as students learned that they were not alone in their struggles and leaned on each other for support, so, too, F&F helped parents find the necessary emotional and social support to keep students on track for college despite doubts, inexperience, and other obstacles.

### **Challenging the System: Promoting Critical Capital and Advocacy**

Increasingly, as F&F engaged parents in learning about college access, it opened the door to the questioning, social critique, and activism that are essential to what Morrell and Rogers (2002) called "critical capital." F&F

encouraged parents to challenge the system with frank talk about race, class, power, and inequality by facilitators, guest speakers, and students, notably at study groups on racism, panel discussions on AP/honors classes, and presentations on test bias (Auerbach, 2002b). Unlike most college access or parent involvement programs, F&F provided a forum where issues that disproportionately affect families of color could be openly discussed. This emphasis on critical capital enhanced families' awareness of barriers to access as well as strategies for overcoming and protesting them. As with marginalized students, outrage over barriers and unequal outcomes was a goad to action for some parents.

One of the most pressing issues for parents that they brought up repeatedly was inadequate or inappropriate academic and college counseling at Pacific High. A Guatemalan father broached the topic at the second F&F meeting: "I read in the news there are some counselors who give the wrong advice to minority students. I'm wondering if this still happens?" A mother who was a Pacific High alumna described her distrust of a counselor said to be "biased toward Latinos" as follows:

I've been wanting to change my child's counselor. This goes back to when I was in school here and had the same counselor. . . . When I was in school, you were not informed about what was out there. . . . You were told what your high school requirements were but not what requirements were to transfer to a university. . . . I wouldn't want to see her waste her years at [the local community college] and be discouraged.

Parents spoke well of Pacific's sole Latino counselor, who knew students well, made home visits, and explained college requirements to families. But they faulted the counseling system for being understaffed and insensitive, as in these comments from an open meeting on the topic:

- We should keep that in mind when we have our discussions: how many students there are [more than 3,000] and how few counselors [six]. [translated quote]
- It's a catastrophe and that's the source of the problem. [translated quote]
- Why don't we have more Spanish-speaking counselors?
- My son was doing badly all year, but the counselor did nothing to help him or find out why this was happening. [translated quote]

Parents were insulted that counselors had no time to return their calls or meet with them, giving them the "runaround" when they sought help. "A parent like me, who doesn't understand how to get into the university system too well, but is trying—I need the school to help me counsel my son," said a Chicana mother. Parents' experience of rebuff was an instance of what Lareau and Horvat (1999) called "moments of social exclusion" that affect families who lack the type of cultural capital recognized by the school (Au-

erbach, 2001). By sharing stories of rebuff at the meetings, parents learned that their experience was common for Latino families and were able to give school administrators important suggestions.

Secondary schools are notably reticent about the existence and workings of tracking systems, and families from marginalized groups have the most to lose from ignorance about the system (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999; Useem, 1991; Yonezawa, 1997). Parents were both bewildered and angered as they learned about tracking, the predominance of White and Asian students in AP and honors classes, and unequal outcomes at Pacific High and elsewhere. "When I see these statistics, one way to help change that is by taking part in a group like this, so we can become more aware [of these conditions] and what they mean to us," said a father at an open meeting [translated quote]. Poor outcomes for students of color went against many parents' assumption that a well-reputed school like Pacific was the route to equal educational opportunity. A mother of 11, accustomed to a more uniform system in Mexico, asked, "Why does the high school offer classes that are not required for university?" [translated quote]. A father wanted to know why there were so few Latinos in advanced classes. Repeatedly, parents insisted that all students should have the "same rights," the "same opportunities," and the "same classes" because "they should all be prepared to go to university." One father, Manuel Carillo (a pseudonym), observed that reform at Pacific had had little impact on its traditional structures for sorting students: "Why do they give the good classes that are needed for university to some and not to others? I suppose that if there's equality, everyone should have the opportunity" [translated quote] (Auerbach, 2002a).

Of all the Futures parents, Manuel was most receptive to the development of critical capital and activism. A restaurant manager with three children, he grew up in extreme poverty in an indigenous village in Mexico and underwent great sacrifice to complete *preparatoria* (upper secondary school in preparation for college). With his family history of local political leadership in México and his experience of discrimination as a minority in his homeland, Manuel was acutely sensitive to equity issues and the struggles of students of color. "Maybe their mother is the dishwasher," he said of children he met at work, "but as soon as they have the chance, maybe they can do better." He told his daughter to "fight, go to another counselor" to "get the classes that you want and [do] not settle for whatever they give you."

F&F became Manuel's education in American schooling and the springboard both for his activism in school governance and his decision to go to community college. He took full advantage of the program's information, social networks, and encouragement of social critique to develop himself as a school leader. He was a regular participant at meetings, despite his 16-hour workdays, and sought varied contacts at the school to help him monitor and guide his daughter. He shared what he learned with a network

of relatives, compatriots, and coworkers, urging other immigrant parents to get involved at school to help their children. Increasingly, he gained the confidence to speak out in English at large school meetings. He used lessons from F&F to press for change, as in calling for more Latino representation in school organizations and greater accountability for school counselors—even after his daughter had graduated. Leaders such as Manuel with the knowledge, skills, and *coraje* to speak for marginalized others are key to helping schools break down barriers to access.

When college access programs open the door to social critique, only small numbers of parents such as Manuel may be moved to advocacy. However, as this study indicates, all parents will gain the chance for insight into the roots of discrimination and exclusion that affect their children and ideas for strategies in confronting them. Significantly, Futures parents often voiced the belief that programs such as Futures and F&F should be available to all students and their families.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

What effect did F&F have on Latino parents and their children in the pursuit of college pathways? First and foremost, parents grasped the notion of steps along the pathway, the need for their involvement in that pathway, and the desirability and viability of 4-year college for their families. Parents expanded their college-relevant social networks, and some gained confidence for intervention, advocacy, and leadership roles. They began to offer more informed, proactive support for their children's college pursuit, thus easing some of the "conflict and challenge" that McDonough (1997) noted surrounds the college planning process for low-SES, first-generation students (Auerbach, 2001). This may have greater ripple effects in the future with younger family members as parents share the experience they have gained with college pathways.

F&F became the vehicle through which most parents of Futures students experienced the school and acquired college knowledge as well as gained insight into their children's experience. They were receptive to the parent program because they saw the Futures Project as sharing their aspirations and caring for their children, with teachers serving as "second dads" and project staff "sponsoring" students' roles (cf. Clark, 1983; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Participation in F&F made the difference for many parents in being able to provide stronger moral, emotional, and instrumental support for college to their children.

Ultimately, most Futures students were accepted at and enrolled in 4-year colleges. This is largely due to the far more intensive efforts of the Futures Project with the students themselves on a daily basis. The effects of a monthly parent program with voluntary attendance are, predictably, more modest. They cannot be disentangled from the effects of other Futures activ-

ities in a qualitative study, except to note that the parents of students who did not go to 4-year colleges were notably absent at meetings. The findings of this study suggest that F&F provided students with an additional source of support for college that in the absence of the program would likely have been less consistent and less informed. In at least several cases, information and support from F&F prevented some parents from obstructing their students' pathway to college. The greatest benefit of outreach to Latino parents in college access programs may be in their potential to develop parents as more knowledgeable, committed allies of students in their quest for higher education (Tierney & Auerbach, in press).

The lessons of F&F and other programs underline the intense interest in and need for college information and support among Latino families who aspire to college for their children. If K-16 partnerships are to take a comprehensive approach to increasing the rate of Latino college access, it behooves them to invest in meeting these parents' needs rather than neglecting this potential resource for students. Outreach to parents need not be labor intensive or expensive but could be based around monthly or even quarterly workshops and build on existing school and college resources, such as the experience of bilingual, bicultural staff, students, and alumni as well as parent educators and organizers.

Specifically, policy makers and educators might consider the following recommendations for engaging Latino parents:

- Start early—no later than the upper elementary grades—to reinforce family college aspirations and introduce the idea of planning for pathways to college. Many parents in this study regretted that they did not have key information before 10th grade about college options and requirements.
- Speak parents' language. Schools and colleges must reach out to Latino parents in both English and Spanish, especially on the Internet and in college directories and catalogues. F&F parents were more likely to participate in small discussions in their dominant language than in large, combined bilingual presentations.
- Think small and personal. Parents who do not typically come to the school are more likely to come to meetings of small groups with which they have some connection—such as a class, club, sports team, or church group—rather than large, schoolwide events. Make meetings as convenient and comfortable as possible. If large events are necessary, arrange for smaller break-out groups and ways for parents to get to know each other over time. Personal face-to-face or telephone invitations to meetings are often more effective than letters or flyers.
- Invite personal stories from guest speakers of similar backgrounds to help families make sense of complex information and feel comfortable asking questions. Guests can include not only K-16 educators, students, and alumni but fellow parents with children in college.
- Reinforce basic college information often, in a variety of ways. It takes time to absorb new, complex information. Written information campaigns or annual



college nights will have only limited impact without sustained contact. Have K-12 students research and present college information to their parents at meetings to attract interest.

- Attend to the specialized information needs of Latino parents, such as worries about children's safety on campus, undocumented status, and loans. These practical issues can become barriers to access unless addressed in a sensitive, culturally appropriate way.
- Give parents opportunities to meet individually with school and college representatives, who can become additional sources of help. Individual contact allows parents to ask questions that are highly specific or private and helps build trust with institutional agents.
- Help parents move through the college planning process together as a group. The social and emotional mutual support that parents gain from undertaking the experience collectively can reduce "cooling out" and increase their commitment to the process.
- Acknowledge the barriers to college access for Latinos and encourage parent learning about educational inequality. Frank discussion of barriers recognizes the realities that students face, introduces strategies for overcoming them, and contributes to a greater sense of community.

Together, such approaches will increase the likelihood of Latino parents being helpful allies rather than bystanders or potential obstacles in students' struggle for access.

## **Appendix**

### **Futures & Families Meeting Topics, 1998-2001**

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#### ***Year 1: 10th Grade***

Are Your Children on the Path to College? (focus group on parent questions, concerns)

College: Making It Happen (California Higher Education Commission video and panel)

All About Tracking

Understanding Grades and Transcripts (hands-on workshop with counselors)

Where Are We Now on Our Paths to the Future? (discussion with principal)

Can We Afford College? Financial Aid Options (overview)

Lessons From the Class of '99 (panel of graduating seniors of color)

Families and Adolescence: Strategies for Success for the Next Generation

#### ***Year 2: 11th Grade***

What I Learned Last Summer (student presentations from University of California, Los Angeles, summer seminar)

College Fair Orientation (prior to high school college fair)

Families' Experience With the Counseling System (with counselors and administrators)

How to Survive and Thrive in Honors/Advanced Placement Classes (panel of students, teachers)

Secrets of the SAT and ACT (panel of students, teachers, test tutors, college reps)

Computer Workshop: Introduction to the Internet

Students' Multiple Worlds: Home, School, Peers (study group)

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? (study group)

The College Search (in the school's College & Career Center)

Using Community College as a Stepping Stone to University: Pros and Cons (panel)

Computer Workshop: Searching for Colleges and Scholarships on the Internet

Futures & Families Summer BBQ and Student Awards

### ***Year 3: 12th Grade***

Family Reception and Rap Session (prior to school college fair)

Countdown to College Applications (in College & Career Center)

Preparing to Apply for Financial Aid: What You Need to Know

FAFSA Workshop (federal financial aid application)

Leaving Home for College (panel)

College Paperwork and Preparations (acceptances, housing, aid, loans, etc.)

Family Graduation Celebration and Student Awards

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## **Notes**

1. All quotes in this article were originally spoken or written in English, unless indicated in the text as a translated quote from Spanish.

2. I recognize that the terminology used for naming persons of Latin American origin is a highly sensitive, personal matter and the basis of ongoing debate. For the sake of clarity and convenience, this article uses the term *Chicano/Chicana* for U.S.-born parents of Mexican ancestry to distinguish them from immigrant parents born in Mexico or Central America. It uses the term *Latino* more broadly to encompass both U.S.-born and immigrant parent subgroups.

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