Fostering Familismo: The Role Familismo Plays in Latiné/x First Generation Transfer Student College Success

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Introduction

Community colleges have served students for over a century, and although they have provided a gateway to higher education for countless individuals, their overall transfer rates have consistently remained low when compared to how many students seek to transfer (H. Johnson & Mejía, 2020; Witt et al., 1994). Throughout this time, practitioners have implemented many policies and practices to improve transfer rates. While modest, recent growth indicates these efforts have not been in vain. Over the past decade, for example, the state of California has seen an increase in transfer students. As C.A. Pérez et al. (2022) illustrated, "total transfers to CSU [California State University] and UC [University of California] increased by 18% and 28%, respectively" (p. 2). Much of this increase can be attributed to the implementation of Associate Degrees for Transfer (ADT), as well as the passing of Assembly Bill 705 (California Acceleration Project, n.d.), which removed previously required pre-transfer-level courses (C.A. Pérez et al., 2022). Nonetheless, despite these gains, community college students who seek to vertically transfer (from a 2-year college to a 4-year university) continue to face many challenges (Laird, 2009).

For instance, community college students are more likely to come from historically marginalized communities and have low-paying jobs that take them away from their studies (Mustafa & Compton, 2014; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010). Additionally, 2-year institutions are

often the only option for “nontraditional, underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students” (Bahr, 2013, p. 139). As a result, a sizable portion of these students have been denied the social capital and resources to which traditional college students (those who enroll full time, do not work, have college-educated parents, among other advantages) have access. These factors make their academic journey even more difficult, particularly if they are first-generation college students (House et al., 2020). Those who are the first in their family to attend college are more likely to drop out in their first year (Ishitani, 2003), often feel lost and alone (López Jiménez, 2022), and experience a sense of insecurity regarding their academic potential (Pratt et al., 2017). This precarious status is further complicated when students are part of such underserved groups as the Latiné/x community.

The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2021) explained that “Latinos are much more likely to be first-generation college students than other racial/ethnic groups” (p. 2). Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) pointed out that the proportion of Latiné/x students who complete their studies within 6 years is 10 percentage points less than whites; this number grows to 14 percentage points when measuring those who graduate within 4 years. Additionally, “while Latino students represent 51 percent of students who declare a degree/transfer goal, they represent 35 percent of those who transfer within four years” (H. Johnson & Mejía, 2020, p. 3). As a result, although there has been an increase in Latiné/x college students, they are still greatly underrepresented at the university level (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Surely, first-generation Latiné/x community college students face unique obstacles that must be explored.

Some have argued that Latiné/x academic struggles are cultural; in other words, there is a false stereotype about this community not valuing education (Capper, 2018). This myth reflects

the tradition of a deficit view of People of Color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As Yosso (2005) postulated, “the assumption follows that People of Color ‘lack’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (p. 70), a lack that is supposedly innate in their race and class. Nevertheless, research has revealed this is indeed a flimsy explanation for the racial gap in academic outcomes. For instance, 88% of the Latiné/x population agrees that college is important in life; meanwhile, 74% of the general public believes this to be so (López, 2009). Latiné/x families, moreover, encourage education since they view it as a “vehicle to social and economic mobility” (Campa, 2010, p. 438). This is what Yosso (2005) referred to as “aspirational capital” (p. 77), the idea that minoritized students aspire to higher education even though they face systemic inequity. Yet, despite this advocacy for schooling, only 12% of Latiné/x individuals between 25-29 years old have a bachelor's degree or higher (López, 2009), and there remains a nearly 20% gap between whites (35.8%) and Latiné/x individuals (16.4%) with a 4-year degree or more (McElrath & Martin, 2021). Hence, although Latiné/x community college students value education and aspire to vertically transfer, they do so at a lower rate than their white peers while also not meeting their own degree/transfer goals.

This reality points to a need for more research that centers the voice of first-generation, Latiné/x individuals who successfully transferred from a 2-year college and graduated from a 4-year university. Including their voice in the academic forum would follow the Critical Race Theory (CRT) tradition of valuing the cultural strength Students of Color bring to the classroom (Straubhaar, 2014), as well as recognizing “that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate and critical” to exposing structures that oppress People of Color (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Their counternarratives would help challenge negative stereotypes and further validate their status as holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002), while also

identifying ways community colleges can better prepare students for transfer and university-level courses. This qualitative study centered the voices of vertical transfers who shared their experiences and shed light on best practices and areas of growth for two-year institutions.

A higher education is an effective way of breaking the poverty cycle while offering new opportunities for students (Jepsen et al., 2014). Thus, in my time as a community college instructor, I have been heavily invested in increasing transfer numbers. From creating presentations on 4-year universities for each class session to working closely with my campus's University Transfer Center (UTC), getting my students to a 4-year university is a goal that informs a lot of what I do at my institution. Of course, the ultimate goal is for these students to complete their baccalaureate degree so they can go on to obtain secure, meaningful careers. Accomplishing this would also have a positive impact on the surrounding community. Among a litany of benefits communities enjoy from higher education are lower unemployment rates, increased tax generation, better healthcare (and thus lower healthcare costs for the community at large), lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse, higher voting turnout, and lower crime rates (Mitra, 2011). In an underserved community like the one in which Oxnard College is located, better access to higher education may prove to be transformative. Accordingly, research like this can help more marginalized students achieve personal and financial freedom, freedoms which translate to an overall healthier, safer community.

Purpose and Research Questions

To better understand the nuances of vertical transfer, as well as to improve community college practices and policies as they pertain to fostering transfer culture, I explored the experiences of Latiné/x individuals who passed through the transfer portal and became the first in their family to complete their baccalaureate degree. Consequently, this study will have

wide-ranging ramifications, not only for practice and scholarship in higher education, but also for Communities of Color.

This study's purpose was to examine the lived experiences of first-generation Latiné/x students who transferred from a 2-year community college (Oxnard) and graduated from a 4-year university. Research questions included:

- How do first-generation Latiné/x transfer students who completed university studies describe their transfer process to the 4-year environment?
- What are the common experiences among first-generation Latiné/x vertical transfer students?
- How do they describe their experience as it relates to academic preparedness at the university level?

Methodology

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative research is the kind that "produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 17). Instead, the researcher uses "a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). Since the settings are specific to context, these studies are not meant to be generalizable (Newcomer et al., 2010; Yin, 2014), especially since the real world is constantly changing and therefore researchers are observers of these changes (M.Q. Patton, 2002). My research, therefore, did not seek an objective reality that can be applied to all sites, rather, it is work that reflects one reality in this time and place. Furthermore, this study went beyond merely observing reality since it follows the critical qualitative research tradition of pushing for social justice, opportunity, and equity (Denzin, 2017; Pasque et al., 2012). Participants identified areas in need of change (Denzin, 2017) to improve transfer rates

and university preparedness, particularly since helping students obtain equity cannot be done without their voice (Felix et al., 2022).

To achieve this, I employed a social constructivist approach, using participants' interpretations to better understand their context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The knowledge co-constructed with my participants is meant to be used to change higher education practices in order to create more equitable outcomes for first generation Latiné/x students. As such, this research project follows the CRT tradition of employing a transformative framework since it "offers liberatory or transformative solution[s]" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). Participants' interpretations were gathered by means of pláticas, a methodology that renounces Western standards (Flores Carmona et al., 2021) by de-centering the majoritarian perspective that usually dominates academic dialogue (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These "informal conversations," deeply rooted in feminist Chicana practices (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 117), align with my own positionality and allow me to collect data from participants in a way that honors their ways of knowing. Such an approach places their experiences "at the center of inquiry" (Denzin, 2017, p. 9), characteristic of the CRT principle of valuing experiential knowledge (Solórzano, 1998). Employing this method also allowed us to create what Solórzano et al. (2000) refer to as counter-spaces, sites People of Color create where deficit views are rejected and lived experience is celebrated. Their stories will help formulate strategies for higher education institutions to move toward more empowering, culturally competent approaches since, as stated by Guajardo and Guajardo (2013), "Plática becomes critical pedagogy when it yields action" (p. 162).
Since this research endeavor explored the experiences of those most affected by community college policies and practices, I utilized a stratified purposeful sampling approach of individuals

who met a specific set of characteristics (Sandelowski, 2000). The target population consisted of those who:

- Identify as Latiné/x (regardless of place of birth and generation in the U.S.).
- Transferred from a community college to a university (vertical transfer).
- Completed their bachelor's degree within the past 5 years.
- Are first generation college graduates.

This study included 12 participants split between former students of mine and individuals I had not worked with before. Each participant attended the same community college, but not necessarily the same 4-year university, and they entered this study by way of personal communication. Snowball sampling, participants recommending additional potential participants, was used for two participants.

The data I relied upon for this study came from the aforementioned pláticas. These "informal conversations" (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 117) occurred over three virtual (Zoom) sessions and phases. Phase I consisted of one-on-one pláticas with each participant. The first plática did not yield too much information regarding community college practices since it was a preliminary meeting that set expectations and logistics, although participants were free to provide details of their transfer journey. After this initial one-on-one meeting, Phase 2 was a longer group session where participants were encouraged to share their experiences while responding to semi-structured interview questions.

Upon analyzing and coding the group sessions data, the next phase (Phase 3) was a member check-in where I met one-on-one with participants to go over their responses from Phase 2. Together, we co-constructed meaning in a way that valued their input (Delgado Bernal,

1998). I then performed a meta-analysis of each participant's experiences to identify and present major themes and findings.

Findings

For first-generation, Latiné/x students, consistent counseling was imperative since the field of higher education is so unfamiliar to them. They expressed frustration at receiving contradictory information regarding their pathway towards transfer, and many times they had to either advocate for themselves or conduct their own research in order to meet course requirements. Additionally, participants urged counselors to not view their students through a deficit lens. Throughout their academic careers, many Latiné/x students encounter microaggressions and low expectations (Dowd et al., 2013; García-Louis, 2020), therefore, participants explained they do not want to see these practices perpetuated at the onset of their higher education experience. Consequently, many of them recommended counselors take cultural competency training to better understand their students and thus avoid this approach. The counseling strategy participants found most effective, nonetheless, was connecting with students. This, according to data collected, can be achieved by showing vulnerability, sharing their personal stories, and showing genuine interest in students' goals. Participants felt that if they could trust their counselors, they were more likely to return to them.

Another major theme I identified related to faculty practices, some of which paralleled feedback participants provided for counselors. For instance, they noted the importance of instructors to be approachable and empathetic. Being that these individuals all went through community college and university, they understood the importance of communicating with faculty and advocating for themselves. Yet, being first-generation college students, they also knew how difficult and intimidating this can be for those new to the academic realm; hence,

faculty who are approachable and easy to talk to, facilitate communication, allowing students to practice a crucial skill that translates into their 4-year experience. Understanding student context is vital for instructors too, since it allows for deadline extensions. There are times, for example, when students are unable to submit assignments due to the realities they face outside of the classroom. Informed instructors are privy to this dynamic and are therefore more understanding. This ties into the next subtheme which is teaching with affirmation.

Participants preferred an educational setting that values their knowledge and validates their contributions. This is especially important for a group that has historically been marginalized and viewed through a deficit lens by the educational system. Finally, similar to their reflections on counselors, participants indicated they sought to make connections with faculty, something they felt lacking at the 4-year level. They placed importance on this aspect since it gives them a sense of belonging. Many Latiné/x students enter higher education already feeling unwelcome (Dowd et al., 2013), so being able to connect with a professor gives them confidence through a sense of belonging. Participants noted it is also impactful when the professor shares their lived experience; it provides a role model of sorts for students since they see themselves in someone who has reached their career goals.

Lastly, participants emphasized how being involved on campus played a key role in their academic journeys. It plugged them into both formal and informal channels, connecting them to people, resources, and opportunities. Whether tutoring at the library, working on campus, or serving on student government, participants found their navigational capital increase to the point where they even applied this immediately upon arriving at their university. Peer groups also provided them with social capital; it allowed them to interact with people who understood them, a form of support that was especially important since they felt out of place in the white space that

is academia. These connections had such a positive effect on them that many dreamed of an alum (alumni) network that would serve many purposes: it would connect current ECC students to ECC mentor alums; it would connect transferring ECC students with former ECC students awaiting them at their 4-year to offer onboarding support; ECC alums would return to ECC to donate funding and volunteer hours; ECC alums would connect with each other for career prospects and advice. In the proceeding sections, I delve more deeply into each one of these major themes and subthemes, beginning with a narrative portion, and following with analysis and discussion.

Additional Recommendations for Community Colleges

As Jain et al. (2011) stated, the issue of community college student access to transfer is one of social justice. For instance, a college degree can provide individuals with social and economic wellbeing, as well as an improved quality of life (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). This is especially true for 2-year institutions serving such income-deprived, historically underserved communities as ECC does. Unfortunately, Latiné/x students often do not achieve their transfer goals (H. Johnson & Mejía, 2020), and they continue to be underrepresented at 4-years (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Yet, the amount of HSIs steadily increases each year (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023a), meaning there are more students at colleges and universities where at least 25% of full-time students identify as Latiné/x (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), and where no less than 50% qualify as low income (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023b). This study's participants identified various ways in which community colleges can facilitate and foster transfer. One way included counselors; they urged counselors to provide consistent counseling, to view students from an asset viewpoint, and to connect with those they serve. Campus administrators can employ

various methods to ensure this occurs, one being a rating system for individual counselors. Students' voices can be heard through surveys they complete in which they reflect on their experience with counselors they work with. This would allow schools to gather crucial data about their counseling practices and services. Moreover, institutional research departments can use these data to identify themes they can then use for cultural responsiveness training. These sessions would help counselors better understand the unique needs of the student populations they serve.

Participants also suggested faculty should practice empathy, teach with affirmation, and form bonds with students. These are all strategies schools can formalize by integrating them into the tenure and peer review process. This would encourage instructors to reflect on how they foster familismo in their own classrooms, be it through deadline extensions, connecting with students, or seeking to understand student context through training, workshops, and other professional development. Such an approach, moreover, would not impinge on academic freedom since it would not dictate what they can teach, rather, it would inform how they can better relate to their students.

Lastly, community college leaders must devise ways to incorporate students into campus culture, be it through employment, student clubs, or student government. Since institutions of higher education receive funding for reaching HSI status, some of it can be used to cultivate intentional familismo. Whether through family events, increased on-campus hiring, or stronger support for student clubs and organizations, allocating resources to communal, collectivist endeavors would help colleges move away from solely relying on students to form community and support networks, a dynamic this study found to consistently occur.

Mission Statements

While implementing the practices listed in the aforementioned section would require training and investment at many levels, one good place for 2-year institutions to start could be mission statements. Since mission statements can guide decision making and inspire practice (Morphew & Hartley, 2006), community colleges can be more intentional about servingness, transfer culture, and social mobility in their mission statements. Additionally, these documents can go a long way in both celebrating and increasing students' aspirational wealth by placing high expectations upon them. For instance, as Abelman and Dalessandro (2008) detailed:

> The vision statements of community colleges do not offer lofty, motivational incentives that encourage students to stretch their expectations and aspirations. They are more in line with the vision statements of proprietary schools, which push market-driven outcomes or emphasize the prospects for employment over academic preparation (p. 321).

Community colleges that serve marginalized groups are working with individuals who have endured negative stereotypes (Capper, 2018; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2006a), experiences which can sometimes lead students to internalize such messaging and doubt their beliefs (Dowd et al., 2013). An affirming, validating mission statement, therefore, can serve not only to drive practice, but it can also motivate and encourage students.

Financial Literacy

This study's participants also expressed they would like to see community colleges place more emphasis on financial literacy. Having gone through both community college and the baccalaureate level, and in some cases even beyond, they understood the importance of utilizing financial aid, grants, and scholarships efficiently. They felt they would have greatly benefited

from this lesson had it come at the community college level. One participant, for instance, pointed out, “Maybe offer a money class. I was lucky because I was always fully funded, but it felt like a miracle.” Funding one’s higher education should not feel like a miracle, and with HSIs enjoying so many grants, it should not be purely up to the students to figure out how to pay for classes. Another participant also highlighted the importance of institutions to provide as much financial support as possible, as she clarified, “You can’t budget your way out of poverty.” One participant explained why finances can be such a barrier for so many first generation Latiné/x students, saying, “As first-generation students from income-deprived backgrounds, we don’t get deep financial literacy lessons.” Yet another participant’s input was nearly identical, expressing, “Nobody taught me this,” when referring to the nuances of financial aid and how to maximize funds. To help with this, he felt it was vital for community colleges to offer workshops and courses on money literacy.

Perhaps this would have helped a participant who shared he was, “Stressed out by financial stuff because it was difficult getting help from my parents for FAFSA, state ID, stuff like that. The paperwork was a hassle.” For first generation college students, navigating higher education comes with many layers, and as he demonstrated, financial literacy is one of them. Another pointed out a class would go a long way in informing students about paying for their schooling, detailing, “The class or workshop shouldn’t just be on financial aid, but how to pay for food, dorms, textbooks. Have someone break down your expenses, what to anticipate in terms of money.” This is difficult enough for any young person setting off on their own for the first time, and it can be especially hard for those who have never had to fund a college education.

Conclusion

After analyzing our pláticas, the major themes I identified were related to a) counseling, b) faculty practices, and c) campus involvement. Their insights were closely tied to familismo, a concept valued by the Latiné/x culture which includes collectivist tendencies and community solidarity (Gonzales, 2019). To begin, participants wanted culturally competent counselors who provided clear, consistent pathways toward completion and with whom they could connect on a personal level. Such a connection encouraged them to return for further sessions and strengthened their bonds to the campus, an aspect especially valued by Latiné/x students (Llamas & Morgan Consoli, 2012). This insight closely mirrored what participants had to say about faculty practices; for example, they expressed a strong preference for empathetic instructors who understood student context, a trait which makes them more amenable to deadline extensions responsive to students' realities outside the classroom.

Approachability is also important since it fosters faculty-student interaction, which not only leads to students advocating for themselves, but serves as vital practice for communicating with professors at the 4-year level. They also indicated how important it is for faculty to avoid a deficit approach. Participants liked working with faculty who valued their contributions and affirmed their status as college worthy. This is significant since many Latiné/x students already feel insecure about their academic capabilities (Cox, 2009). Furthermore, studies indicated low expectations from teachers often leads to low performance from students (Rubie-Davies, 2006), thus faculty who validate their students can avoid this dynamic. Like with counselors, participants seek personal connections with faculty members since this gives them a sense of belonging and reduces what F. Contreras and G.J. Contreras (2015) called the trespasser syndrome many Latiné/x students face.

The feeling of belonging was something participants also gained through involvement both in campus culture and through peer groups. Serving a role in the institution beyond that of a student, be it as a tutor, employee, or through student government, plugged students into various channels and networks that opened many opportunities and resources for them. These experiences were so impactful, participants noted they followed this same strategy of campus integration upon transferring to a 4-year. Furthermore, peer groups allowed them to expand what Yosso (2005) referred to as social and navigational capital, collecting vital information that helped with how to make their way through an unfamiliar environment. Should community colleges put this participant input into practice, especially those that serve Latiné/x communities, this may lead to improved transfer outcomes.

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