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## College Aspirations and Limitations: The Role of Educational Ideologies and Funds of Knowledge in Mexican American Families

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*Using a qualitative multiple-case-study design, this study explored how funds of knowledge in Mexican American families contributed to the development of educational ideologies. Findings illustrated the following ways in which families are involved in their children's education: the formation of both helpful and limiting educational ideologies, which highlighted beliefs regarding college-going processes; college information drawn from social networks and academic symbols found in families' everyday lives; and the development of college-going realities. Unique to this study is the extension of funds of knowledge beyond traditional K–12 discussions and the incorporation of outreach literature into this framework when studying issues of college access.*

**KEYWORDS:** college access, college aspirations, funds of knowledge, Mexican American families, parent involvement

Underrepresented students continue to struggle with a myriad of social and educational inequities in their pursuit of higher education. Their underrepresentation in colleges and universities has been influenced not by a lack of academic ability (K. P. Gonzalez, Stone, & Jovel, 2003) but by the rising costs of college, increased standards in admissions criteria, and inadequate secondary education preparation (Auerbach, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999). This struggle is no different for Latino<sup>1</sup> students.

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According to the 2000 census, 48% of the Hispanic population aged 25 or older lacked high school credentials, compared to 20% for the population as a whole (Ruppert, 2003). Since 1980, the gap in college attendance rates between Hispanic and Black students and their White counterparts has remained fairly constant (Bowden & Elrod, 2004). Bowden and Elrod (2004) illustrate that between 1980 and 1997, college attendance rates increased 16% for White students, 11% for Black students, and only 6% for Hispanic students. In 2004, Chapa and De La Rosa reported that Latinos made up less than 10% of the total college enrollment in 2-year, 4-year, and graduate institutions. Research suggests that the proportion of the nation's Latino population grew by more than 57% between 1990 and 2000 (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004). This growth is expected to increase by nearly 50% between 2000 and 2015 (Ruppert, 2003). Yet, college-going rates for Latino students do not proportionately match the growth in population (Bowden & Elrod, 2004), suggesting that the gap in college attendance between Latino and White students will continue to grow dramatically (Ruppert, 2003).

When reviewing educational attainment data for Latinos, Chapa and De La Rosa (2004) state that Mexicans have the lowest educational attainment compared to that of other Latino subgroups, as well as the lowest high school completion rates, at 26.7% (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004). When we consider that half of all Latinos leave high school prior to graduation (Oliva & Nora, 2004), the rate of high school completion for Mexican students becomes even more dire. Despite the dismal statistics, Mexicans hold education as an important value and have positive educational aspirations.<sup>2</sup> However, negative educational myths about this group continue to exist.

Illiterate, uninvolved in school activities, and lacking value for education are a few of the negative educational myths formed about Mexican families. Often parents who are not engaged in traditional involvement roles are perceived as being unengaged in their students' "educational lives" (Lopez, 2001, p. 417). Quite conversely, Mexicans are a literate population, in English and especially Spanish (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992); they have passed on strong educational values despite having fought through years of educational systems' subordination of their culture (Valenzuela, 1999; Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996); and they instill these educational values and agency through life lessons (Lopez, 2001). The basis of this deficit view stems from the concept of "familial deficits" (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83), which argues that Mexican Americans do not hold education in high value, thus leading to inadequate familial socialization for academic competence and contributing to school failure for their children.

As research and practice shift and this deficit view is challenged, educators are increasingly attempting to incorporate parents in various educational opportunities (Lopez, 2001). Involvement is recommended and studied at earlier ages, prior to middle and high school. By the time students

reach middle or high school, their educational aspirations and patterns of achievement have often already been established (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). Therefore, research attempting to understand parental influence on students' aspirations may not reflect the influence of families. Instead, evidence indicates that parents have already shaped the educational aspirations of their children during grades K–6 (Goldenberg et al., 2001). Likewise, college outreach literature states that outreach initiatives should begin during elementary school, as students are forming their college aspirations during this crucial time (Auerbach, 2004; Tierney, Colyar, & Corwin, 2003). Finally, research suggests that rather than attempt to involve parents in traditional ways, schools should identify the ways that parents are already involved, specifically tapping into families' funds of knowledge (N. Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Lopez, 2001).

In an effort to challenge the literature that focuses on familial deficits, the intent of this research is to understand families from a different model, that of funds of knowledge. *Funds of knowledge* refers to the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). In doing so, this study highlights the educational ideologies<sup>3</sup> of families to better understand the development of educational philosophies, processes, and aspirations.

The use of the funds of knowledge framework is ideally situated for various reasons. As evidenced, research suggests that parents be incorporated earlier and in more culturally sensitive ways into their children's educational processes. While this framework has not been used to study the connection between the values and resources in the home and college access, studies do show the development of enhanced literacy (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2004), enhanced mathematical skills (Knobel, 2001), and overall student confidence (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996). I argue that when funds of knowledge are examined through the lens of college culture and access, this framework can be quite useful in understanding the development of families' educational ideologies and aspirations. The purpose of the study is to understand how Mexican American families in a university outreach program formed their educational ideologies.

There are multiple goals for this study. First, I extend the discussion on funds of knowledge beyond K–12 literature, as this study is one of the first to utilize this framework when studying issues of college access. I also contribute to college outreach literature by providing examples of culturally relevant ways in which families can be incorporated into programs. Finally, I represent the inherent resources found in families while challenging educational organizations to understand their role in perpetuating deficit perspectives.

Utilizing the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge as well as social and cultural capital, I address the following research questions:

What factors influence the development of families' educational ideologies? How might educational ideologies influence future college access?

### **Educational Ideologies and Aspirations of Mexican Families**

The misguided educational beliefs about Latino parents discount their views and diminish their value (Lott, 2001). Valencia and Black (2002) deconstruct these deficit thoughts and present evidence of the value of education through the historical and contemporary struggle for equal educational opportunity and the involvement of parents, as illustrated in scholarly literature. Commitment to education is also illustrated in nonmainstream forms of teaching, from *consejos* (advice-giving narratives; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Lopez, 2001) and counternarratives used to contest family practices viewed as being problematic (Villenas, 2001) to the use of funds of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996). Involvement is demonstrated by highlighting parents' active engagement and agency; in some cases, parents have begun demanding that they be more involved, holding schools accountable (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Lopez, 2001).

Developing educational ideologies and aspirations in the home extends beyond conventional ideas of encouraging students to further their education, filling out college applications, and facilitating college visitations. While these behaviors are exhibited in some Mexican families, one must acknowledge how educational ideologies manifest in alternative ways. Lopez (2001) notes that oftentimes families are already involved in educational processes; however, they may not be involved in traditionally recognized ways. Additional research indicates that aspirations are based on the belief that education is not only "conducive to social and economic mobility" but also a "means of personal fulfillment" (Goldenberg et al., 2001, p. 565). Thus, highlighted next are examples illustrating the educational strengths inherent in families. In a case study of five Mexican families, Treviño (2004) found that all the families set high academic standards for their children, recognized the need to provide academic support when possible, expected that their children graduate from high school and college, and made education the top priority. While these beliefs may fall in line with mainstream educational ideologies, parents taught their children to tap into their survival strategies of outthinking and outworking to achieve success, and they instilled a foundation of *respeto* (respect), pride, and faith (Treviño, 2004). In the case of one immigrant Mexican family, Lopez (2001) found that the family passed on ideologies established in resilience, perseverance, and hard work—lessons learned from working hard in the fields and translated into working hard in the classroom. In a final example, Delgado-Gaitan (1992) highlights Mexican American families where parents and children are both active agents of their educational environments; that is, parents transmitted positive educational values to their children, and children transmitted knowledge in return to parents.

It is evident that while Mexicans continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education, their families do value education. As demonstrated, the transmission of sociocultural values is an important form of educational involvement (Lopez, 2001). Through the findings that follow, I demonstrate that the transmission of sociocultural values acts as an important means of establishing positive educational ideologies, specifically about college-going processes.

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws from three theoretical frameworks. The primary theoretical framework is *funds of knowledge* (N. Gonzalez et al., 2005), with *social capital* (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) and *cultural capital* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) serving as supplemental frameworks. I draw from the constructs found within each framework, rather than operate within the strict parameters of one particular theory. I provide a brief overview of each, as followed by an explanation of how the frameworks complement each other.

### Funds of Knowledge

The *funds of knowledge* framework refers to the bodies of knowledge and skills in a household that have accumulated over time (Moll et al., 1992). It is based on the foundation that people are competent and have experiential knowledge that is valuable (N. Gonzalez et al., 2005).

The term originally referred to the nonmarket forms of exchange among households and evolved to include the general knowledge and cultural exchange among households (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). Economic and political forces shaped the nature of binational households and families across the U.S.-Mexico border. These forces contributed to the transformations of cultural and behavioral practices termed *funds of knowledge* (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005). Defining funds of knowledge within families requires an understanding of strategic bodies of information that households utilize in their daily activities and need for their survival and well-being. Because of changing economic and political circumstances, it was necessary for household members to become generalists and obtain a range of knowledge. Examples of such knowledge include water management, animal husbandry, and construction (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

The transmission of funds of knowledge is a dynamic process. Children control the method by which they learn, which allows for them to make mistakes and experiment with their learning. Funds of knowledge are found within households and within the cluster networks of the community where children play and associate (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005). When funds of knowledge are fully understood and properly utilized, they facilitate

a powerful way to represent communities in terms of their inherent resources, and they create opportunities to use those resources for classroom teaching (N. Gonzalez et al., 2005). This view of families is different from the accepted perceptions of cultural and intellectual deficiencies. The value of funds of knowledge not only acknowledges diverse types of knowledge and skills within households but challenges functionalist notions of “cultural arbitraries” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 9) that express and perpetuate the status of dominant groups.

### **Cultural and Social Capital**

Originally presented as a theoretical hypothesis to explain the unequal academic achievement of children in different social classes (Bourdieu, 1986), *cultural capital* is summarized as “high status cultural signals used in cultural and social selection,” and it is used to analyze “how culture and education contribute to social reproduction” (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 153). The term is used broadly in an attempt to understand societal inequalities and, specifically, inequities in educational outcomes. Cultural capital is used to address (a) various cultural forms, competencies, and knowledge that certain individuals possess and (b) the systemic perpetuation of power and privilege (McDonough, 1997; Tierney, 2002).

*Social capital* is described as the aggregate of resources that are linked to the possession of a network or membership within a group that provides its members with collectively owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, social capital is the result of people intentionally building their relationships for benefits provided at a later time (Portes, 2000). I draw from Stanton-Salazar’s definition of social capital (2001), which highlights these relationships among people and the properties within them that “when activated, enable them to accomplish their goals or to empower themselves in some meaningful way” (p. 265). The dimensions of social capital—norms, networks, and obligations—highlight aspects of the relational investments, standards, and information transfer created when social capital is activated. This is similar to the ideas of exchange relations (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996) developed in the transmission of funds of knowledge.

Although the primary framework used in this study is funds of knowledge, it does share commonalities with cultural and social capital. One key commonality is that all three forms—funds of knowledge, social capital, and cultural capital—can be transmitted. Despite differences in the method of transmission and the context of the transmission process, each form can be passed on to others. A second commonality is that all three forms can be converted. For example, cultural capital can be converted into economic capital and academic gains; social capital can be converted into economic capital and institutionalized gains (Bourdieu, 1986); and funds of knowledge can be converted (if valued and recognized) into social and cultural capital.

The three forms also share commonalities in how each measures and defines its properties.

Regarding funds of knowledge and social capital, both can be accumulated, and membership in a network can translate into future positive benefits for the members. However, social capital and funds of knowledge require that a certain level of investment be made in the relationships of the network to access the future gains (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Moll, & Bryan, 2009). Funds of knowledge and cultural capital share a common perspective in how educational knowledge and culture are valued. Both frameworks assert that certain individuals and their knowledge are not valued, because they do not belong to the dominant culture (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2009). It is beyond the scope of this article to go into further detail on the similarities and differences of these frameworks. However, I acknowledge one key difference—namely, social capital and cultural capital have been constructed from a sociological perspective, while the funds of knowledge framework has been constructed from an anthropological perspective. This difference highlights the ways in which the concepts have been documented and studied. I also acknowledge a warning that Lubienski (2003) provides. She shares that funds of knowledge and, specifically, cultural capital are being used synonymously and that doing so overlooks the inequities in our educational system and continues to “avoid the problems that many underserved students and their teachers face” (p. 30). Lubienski’s warning addresses the differentials in power and resources held by various groups. She aptly points out that although funds of knowledge and cultural capital both have value, the former is not the latter, because under the original definitions of Bourdieu, the worth of funds of knowledge is not such that it would lead to a place in privileged social groups.

There is certainly overlap between funds of knowledge and forms of capital. I include social and cultural capital as supplemental frameworks because they provided a way to understand concepts such as social networks, reciprocity, cultural signals, perpetuation of social class placement, and conversion. I also include these frameworks to better understand why funds of knowledge “have or have not translated into better educational opportunities and outcomes for under-represented students” (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2009, p. 11). Finally, utilizing these complementing frameworks provides an opportunity to look beyond a functionalist perspective that privileges the dominant class and addresses power structures within the system by challenging those inequities (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2009).

## Method

The data represented in this article are drawn from a larger study examining the funds of knowledge present in Mexican American families and how those funds of knowledge contribute to the development of educational



ideologies within their family unit. The study was conducted at a large Research I university in the Southwest, which included two phases of data collection. The institution sponsors the Parent Outreach Program,<sup>4</sup> which provides parents of K–5 students information about high school and college as a way to prepare children for academic success. The program aligns with recommendations indicating that outreach should begin no later than upper elementary grades, because students begin forming college-going aspirations at early ages (Auerbach, 2004; Tierney et al., 2003). The program also provides enhanced opportunities for future college access by informing parents about summer programs, sponsoring on-campus events, and introducing parents to key faculty and staff.

### **Site and Sample Population**

During the time that this study was conducted, the Parent Outreach Program served about 85 families a year, approximately 40% of whom were primarily English speaking and 60% of whom were primarily Spanish speaking. The majority of parents identified as *Hispanic*. The Parent Outreach Program provided the opportunity to discuss issues of college access and choice with families who already indicated positive educational aspirations for their children, as evidenced by their program participation. Thus, the program provided access to a sample that was then purposefully assembled on the basis of criterion measures that ensured that each case met some criteria (Creswell, 2007). For example, two criterion measures were those of language and socioeconomic class. The majority of families in this study were lower to lower-middle class and considered themselves Mexican American.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the majority of parents in this study had not completed a college degree and fit within definitions of first-generation college families.

The sample selected for both phases of this study consisted of Mexican American English-speaking families. Families are defined by the parents, guardians, children, and extended family that live in the household or frequently visit, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The families represented nine elementary schools, and all participants chose English as their primary language. Findings are not representative of all families participating in the Parent Outreach Program, and I recognize that the stories of the Spanish-speaking families represent valuable insight not shared here. However, I chose to interview English-speaking families for two reasons. First, I worked solely with English-speaking families in an effort to establish a depth of rapport and trust that was impractical with Spanish-speaking families due to my own limitations in speaking Spanish. I am Mexican American but did not grow up speaking Spanish. While I do speak and understand some Spanish, I am not fluent and chose not to use a translator for this study. This decision is consistent with the outreach program's

values. The program provides all participants with the same resources and information but in two separate workshops, where parents can choose the language they are most comfortable with. I also chose not to use a translator in an effort to maintain the program values of delivering information in the families' primary language. The final sample was constructed to ensure variation of family units (i.e., single-parent homes, multiple-generation homes, and number of children in the household). This was done in an effort to assemble a sample that was reflective of the diverse nature of families.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The initial data collection phase originated from interviews with 27 parents during the first year of the program (spring 2004). Interviews were conducted by a research team composed of faculty and students from the College of Education. Semistructured pre- and post-program interviews were conducted with each set of parents. The interview questions focused on parents' expectations for the program, educational values and ideologies, social and cultural capital, and program outcomes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. During analysis of these interviews, discussions around families' funds of knowledge ensued. Our team was interested in exploring not only the programmatic expectations and educational values of parents but the daily home practices that shaped those expectations and values. Thus, this first phase of data collection provided the basis from which the second round grew. Parents who participated in this first phase of data collection did not partake in oral history interviews. However, I decided to utilize these data, as parents' experiences provided additional depth to the second phase of collection and analysis. Additionally, even though interviews were conducted 3 years prior to the second phase, analysis revealed consistency in values, expectations, and concerns across both sets of data.

As the second phase of data collection and the primary data source, multiple case studies were conducted during the spring 2007 program, specifically with six families. Case studies represent a single subject as the focus of study. In this instance, use of a multiple-case-study design implies that the study consists of more than a single case (Yin, 2003). In this phase, family units represented the cases and served as the objects of analysis. By adopting a case study approach with six families, a comparative element was built, allowing for the exploration of multiple perspectives on funds of knowledge and educational ideologies. The choice of a multiple-case-study design is advantageous as multiple case studies have been regarded as producing compelling data because of "replication logic" (p. 47). Although it is a multiple-case-study design, the sample included six families from one outreach program at one institution. The implications outlined at the end of this article are not applicable to all institutions or outreach programs. The funds of knowledge framework was a guiding factor in

choosing case studies for this design. Funds of knowledge provide a rich framework that allows for similar patterns to emerge across several cases (a literal replication; p. 48). Therefore, multiple case studies that are guided by a rich framework become helpful in informing new cases drawing from the same framework.

Case studies should include multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003). The second phase of data collection included 12 semistructured pre- and post-program interviews combined with approximately 20 open-ended oral history interviews with six families (a total of five to six interviews with each family). The goal of the interviews was twofold: to gather data and to create the relational aspect of the research, a critical element in understanding participants' perspectives when employing an ethnographic approach to the case study (Mertens, 1998).

The protocol utilized for the pre- and post-program interviews was consistent with that of the initial phase of data collection. Based on analysis of the Phase 1 interview data, three to five oral history interviews were incorporated with each family in the Phase 2 data collection in an effort to obtain a better understanding of families' funds of knowledge.

Oral history interviews were conducted approximately three to four times with each family while the program was in session, and they occurred over the course of nine months. These interviews were conducted in participants' homes or at various neighborhood locations. Conducting oral histories allowed participants to remember the past and link it to the present (Mertens, 1998), and it allowed me to partially mimic the original funds of knowledge research conducted by N. Gonzalez et al. (2005). The guiding oral history questions for the current study were informed by the protocol used in the original funds of knowledge study. These interviews consisted of questions about family history, labor history, routine household practices, and child-rearing philosophies. Specifically, questions focused on families' migration to the local area, involvement with community, lessons learned from employment, and household routines. Finally, conducting oral histories allowed for a deeper understanding of the social history of families' households and how knowledge is taught and received in their households. Loosely structured interviews were not the sole means for collecting data on oral histories; unstructured observations, attendance at family events, conversations, and audio recordings were included as well. Detailed observation notes were taken describing the homes, communities, and neighborhoods where families lived. N. Gonzalez et al. referred to the importance of observing the neighborhoods and external markers present in the community. Understanding the context of where families live is important, as exchange relations often take place within the social networks in the community. In my observation notes, I included informal conversations with the children and other members of family after the official interview had been conducted.

A list of informal codes using open coding was developed from an initial read of the transcripts. This open coding allowed me to add to a preexisting list of codes originally informed by the study's theoretical framework. Coding involved both deductive and inductive processes and led to axial coding, where specific categories were developed (Creswell, 2007). Grouping data into categories allowed me to establish themes across cases (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, educational ideologies as a theme consisted not only of educational aspirations for families but where the information came from and what factors or experiences shaped those ideologies. Codes were established for ideologies that both helped and limited the children. Finally, I coded for examples that illustrated how successful ideologies were measured.

### Trustworthiness

*Member checking and transcript review.* I offered study participants the opportunity to read their interview transcripts, which allowed for them to make corrections, add new information, verify findings, and critique specific questions if they did not think that the questions were appropriate (Creswell, 2007). I also offered families the opportunity to meet again should they believe that the transcripts were missing information or needing to be edited. All but two families chose to read the transcripts. Of those that did so, verification was offered rather than correction. The process of providing transcripts to family members thus served as a member-checking tool.

*Peer debriefing.* To reduce bias in the analysis of these data, I debriefed (Creswell, 2007) with members of the College of Education/Parent Outreach Program research team and a colleague whose research is in a similar field, to review findings from the pre- and post-interviews as well as the oral history interviews. Peer review helped to verify the existence of patterns and themes and offered a critical perspective when my own cultural biases were influencing the nature of the questions. The peer review process also aided in the interpretation of data. Finally, these meetings and presentations of my work helped me to process many of the limitations that I had not yet considered.

### Researcher's Voice

There are multiple tensions found within this article. These tensions are highlighted in the ways in which college limitations are placed on families by programs and institutions and by the limitations developed within families. These limitations represent complex familial processes and the tensions that are the most difficult for me to accurately convey. I experience great tension because of my identity as a first-generation Mexican American from a working-class background similar to families in this study. My inherent identity allowed me to connect with families, but my recently acquired

academic identity, as layered on the foundation, created distance from families as well. I believe that it is important to highlight the rich educational values and lessons found within our families. However, I also believe that it is important to represent the complexities of our experiences and the consequences that result from those complexities. I have seen that educational success is a reality for our families, but this success is often still defined within the boundaries of traditional educational processes. Therefore, in presenting the findings and implications that follow, I attempt to present both the successes among families and the complex limitations that sometimes challenge a smooth transition into college-going opportunities for their children.

## **Findings and Discussion**

It was evident in this study, as supported in the literature (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lopez, 2001; Valencia & Black, 2002; Villenas, 2001; Zarate, 2007), that Mexican parents placed a high value on education. This study presents additional evidence that families form educational ideologies in a variety of ways and that, many times, those ideologies serve as positive influences. Equally relevant and evident are the realistic tensions surrounding the families' circumstances resulting in limiting educational ideologies.

A number of factors influence the development of families' educational ideologies. Among those, college artifacts and symbols are explored in detail, as is the role of social networks. The college process, including choice and preparation, was constructed in nontraditional ways, and it often included an incomplete understanding of the process. While the Parent Outreach Program did not change the value placed on education, it did allow families to see college as a more realistic option, and it provided families with concrete information. Thoughts about educational choices were often found at two ends of the spectrum. Either families' college knowledge was limited to the local institutions, or families wanted their children to attend the most prestigious institutions. A few exceptions emerged where parents developed their college-choice ideologies based on a particular experience. Those examples are highlighted in the following pages.

### **Sources of College Information: Social Networks, Cultural Symbols**

*Social networks.* Children often first learn about college from their parents. Although characterized as first-generation college families, the families in this study constructed conceptions of college from social and familial networks and specifically by personal experience or family members who had attempted college. In social capital and funds of knowledge, social networks are considered the means by which information is channeled from one member to another. It is clear that these networks facilitated higher levels of accomplishment and empowerment that may not have been

possible without them (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Networks served as information channels and highlighted relationships built on trust that allowed for exchange of support and resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). For example, a mother of two young boys was accepted to the local university after graduating from high school:

It was overwhelming to me the thought of it, and just money wise. I went to [the local community college] and then from there to a medical institute. I didn't even know where the university was when I graduated [high school]. (Elsa,<sup>6</sup> 2004 [occupation unknown, sons aged 10 and 6])

Elsa explained that her family was just happy that she had graduated high school, not even realizing that there was college after high school. While education was a central value to this family, their conceptions of college were influenced by Elsa's past experiences of feeling overwhelmed, which served as a limiting factor in the development of college-going ideologies. Even though Elsa did take classes at the local community college, that experience did not result in an eventual degree. The unease that Elsa felt when attempting those classes was evident in our discussions about college for her children. This sentiment is consistent with parents in Auerbach's study (2007) whose disappointing educational experiences led them to be cautious about future opportunities.

However, social networks served as informational resources and provided families with concrete examples toward which they were able to aspire. This supports research conducted by Delgado-Gaitan (1992), who found that social networks facilitated an important exchange about schooling issues. In the current study, one family had recently moved from California, where their extended family still resided. A niece was attending San Jose State University, and through conversations with her, the family learned about other institutions within the California state system. The mother explained which campuses she preferred based on safety and size. Because of her niece's college experience, this mother became aware of different institutions and had someone whom she could ask college-related questions:

The great thing about it is this generation—not [my daughter's] generation but the generation before her—my nieces—they are going to college. Casandra is in her third year now. So hopefully when [my daughter] starts showing interest, Casandra will be there to answer questions she might have and stuff. You know truly and honestly, Judy, if nothing else I want my girls to go to school and just experience life. (Janice, 2007 [insurance biller, daughters aged 14, 12, 5])

These experiences support research that encourages researchers and practitioners to acknowledge the “rich, varied, and positive experiences

regarding the importance of education” (Saracho & Martinez-Hancock, 2004, p. 258). These examples acknowledge the families’ experiences in higher education and how those experiences shaped their college ideologies.

A grandfather who participated in the first year of the Parent Outreach Program had extensive experience at the local university in his role as a vending machine repairman. He had this to offer: “I spend a lot of time there. We handle all the snack machines on campus. I’m down there quite often”—to which his wife laughed and responded, “See if you got a complaint, you got the number you can call him.” During our post-program interview, the grandfather’s on-campus experience was again mentioned:

GRANDFATHER: Uh, well actually knowing what departments are at the [university], really. I mean I spend a lot of time down there and there’s a lot of stuff that I wasn’t aware of. And knowing where a lot of this stuff is now and knowing who you can actually go and ask for.

JMK: Were you guys able to go on the tour the day that they had it?

GRANDFATHER: My wife did. I work down there quite a bit, with my business so I’ve been there. Like I told [the director], I could probably take you places she’s never been. But that was just between us. (Rogelio, 2004 [grandchildren aged 11, 9, 7])

Our conversations highlight a number of interesting themes. His experience, although not a traditional university position, provided the grandfather with an understanding of the campus. He knew how to successfully navigate the physical campus. The grandfather’s role as a vending machine repairman illustrated funds of knowledge in various forms. His expertise in maintenance and repair fit the funds of knowledge framework, as it demonstrated knowledge that could be taught within a family unit: His role took place on a university campus, extending funds of knowledge beyond the household and creating opportunities for his family to learn about an important educational setting. Yet, despite this knowledge, there is a negative perception about his role. His wife mentioned contacting him when complaints arise; in a subtle way, she is highlighting the stereotypical characteristics of a service professional’s role, typically held by people of color and twice as likely held by Latinos (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004), lacking in professional expertise, and available to serve the needs and complaints of the dominant group. However, I argue that this grandfather’s knowledge of the physical campus is quite valuable. Not only might this grandfather extend this knowledge to his family members and introduce them to the educational setting, but the Parent Outreach Program could have expanded on that knowledge to help him and other parents navigate campus. As previously expressed, he said that he could show us places on campus that most people would not know about. Why not encourage the grandfather to do so? Such an act validates his role, builds confidence in his knowledge, and provides a concrete example of household expertise to other parents. Incorporating parents into leadership

roles provides a sense of ownership and can result in long-term maintenance of college knowledge within the community (Downs et al., 2008).

Unfortunately, the link between knowledge of the physical campus and the translation into concrete college knowledge was not present. Although this grandfather did not know how to make college a reality, he did know where to make college a reality. For some parents, the physical campus itself serves as a barrier, accessible to only a select few. In this particular case, the grandfather already had access to the physical campus; however, I am uncertain whether he realized the access that he was granted.

Building social capital among networks of educators, families, and communities provides positive outcomes. These outcomes are realized in the form of increased parental support and improved understanding of children's needs (Auerbach, 2007). Social networks associated with educational experiences can also provide an improved understanding of the educational system and concrete aspirations about future college attainment. However, if social networks are associated with negative educational experiences—like a difficult transition from high school, taking college courses and not finishing—then one can pass on ideologies surrounded by misinformation, fear, and lack of understanding.

*Academic cultural symbols.* Symbols also played a role in influencing families' conceptions of college. Symbols around the culture of education shaped the ways in which families organized their thoughts about college-going realities.

One mother offered the following when asked what colleges her son might attend: "Florida State. His dad has his ring and says, 'Oh, my son's going to be a Seminole one day.'" While the mother was happy with any college choice, the father's collegiate experience and the symbolism of the college ring had a significant influence in their son's educational ideologies. Another mother offered the following statement when asked if her son would go to college: "Oh he will. When he had his little cap and gown in kindergarten I said, 'Just three more to go.' So he already believes." The cap and gown served as symbolic markers on this family's college timeline.

One of the most telling examples of how cultural symbols shape educational ideologies is found in the following example, "the University of Michigan story." I began the topic of college choice by asking a father where he hoped his daughters would go to college:

FATHER: My oldest one's already talking about Michigan. . . . She's had it, like, the last three years.

JMK: So how did she find out about Michigan?

FATHER: PlayStation and me watching college football . . . because everybody just knows, oh, [the local university] because of commercials, the news and everything. But it's true, if you watch sports on the weekends, of another school, it's like wow. Because you know, during the games, they give—



JMK: Right. They show little clips of the school.

FATHER: This is what you're going to get at this school. And when she saw Michigan—first, the colors. Boom. But then I showed her, look at the marching band because she's like me, "Oh, wow." And then, she goes, "Let's look up Michigan." . . . She just saw it and was just like, "I want to go to that school." (Will, 2007 [army veteran and student, daughters aged 11, 9])

A couple of minutes into this conversation, Will's daughter began playing the University of Michigan fight song on her band instrument. Will interrupted the conversation to explain what I was hearing. During a football game, his daughter had asked the name of the University of Michigan fight song. She realized that it was in her band songbook and began practicing the first four bars.

It was encouraging to see that this father and daughter created high college aspirations. However, in all of my conversations with Will, he rarely mentioned the steps necessary to achieve such aspirations. He understood college entrance exams, how to meet with an advisor, and how to schedule classes, but he was less familiar with the precollege process. Will's example highlights aspirations and a limitation: having a high value for education and a knowledge about particular pieces of the college process but missing certain components of how to get there. This is not uncommon of first-generation college students, as they often have less access to information about postsecondary education (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007). However, families in this study are already creating supportive aspirations in the pursuit of higher education. Developing college aspirations early is important, as Strayhorn (2006) reports that higher educational aspirations in first-generation college students are associated with higher grade point averages while in college. This is also important when constructing potential collegiate identities. Toma (1999) argues that college sports are used as a way for institutions and individuals to construct identities for themselves, thus providing opportunities for people to invest in something they believe to be significant. This was evidenced in Will's example above and is found in the example below.

I asked Janice where she envisioned her daughters going to college. She answered the question based on her oldest daughter's athletic abilities and interest in softball:

I don't know where—she's an awesome softball player. I truly, honestly think she's going to get called out by a college for softball. If that takes her to Tennessee, if it takes her Florida, if it takes her to Oklahoma, who am I to say, "No, don't go for it. Don't follow it," you know? I would like for the [local university] to call her out for softball, but if they don't, they don't. Or UCLA's even closer than Florida, but whatever she wants to do. Wherever it takes her and it allows her to get an education, I'm going to be all for it. (2007)

It is unclear from this example how much information the mother knew about each of the institutions mentioned. It is clear, however, that she was

referencing some of the top collegiate softball programs in the country. Whether her daughter is recruited for a college team remains to be seen; the important aspect of this example is that Janice understood that there are a variety of choices when it comes to college opportunities. She may not have been aware of these institutions if her daughter was not a softball player.

There is an important institutional consideration to note as well. Toma (1999) addresses the significant resources dedicated to “constructing a positive institutional identity” (p. 81). One way of developing this positive identity is through spectator sports programs (Toma, 1999). For the two families highlighted above, institutional athletics were more present than academic programs, leaving one to question how institutions are promoting themselves to communities, particularly low-income communities of color.

The first example in this section demonstrated how a college ring could shape the educational future of a child. The ring represented more than a piece of jewelry and became an educational goal, a physical place, an expectation, and an educational legacy. The second example illustrated a father tapping into his funds of knowledge and love of sports. Watching football became a means to educate his daughter about college. He took the time to use the Internet to introduce his daughter to the campus and the fight song. This allowed her to connect an abstract idea about college with the concrete act of creating a college sound. Funds of knowledge were successfully transferred from the father to the daughter, and she incorporated that knowledge into her own educational ideologies about a particular institution. The final example demonstrated how love of softball opened up out-of-state educational possibilities for the family. It is interesting that in these two cases, sport emerges as a key informant about college. College sports are missing from the current literature on college choice and access for Mexican American students. Becoming a college student-athlete may not be a realistic aspiration; however, college sports do serve as one of several factors in the college choice process. Yet, literature examining the influence of sports on college choice utilizes general admission data (Toma & Cross, 1998) and highlights African American student processes (Braddock & Hua, 2006) and broader definitions of student populations with no specific discussion of Mexican American students' experiences.

These introductions to college are important because of their uniqueness, and they illustrate that there is no set way in which parents in this study constructed their conceptions of college. College ideologies do not follow a traditional pattern and do not fit into established literature about college choice processes (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

### College Aspirations and Limitations

*Barriers to college attendance: Finances and choice.* All the parents in the outreach program anticipated that their children would pursue a college

education. However, aspirations were sometimes entangled with misconceptions about the process. Parents' educational aspirations for their children were often clouded by anticipated financial barriers. When asked if there was anything that might stop their children from attending college, many parents cited finances. However, knowledge of financial assistance was often limited to scholarships. While parents gained an increased understanding of the costs of college through the Parent Outreach Program, they did not have a complete understanding of the financial assistance available, and some left the program wanting more information about navigating the financial aid application process. Although parents thought that finances might serve as barriers, they offered examples of sacrifice in how they would compensate for those financial hurdles. These financial sacrifices took on many forms. One mother explained, "I've already decided that if I have to move back into a one-bedroom apartment, that's what I'll do." Another father stated that he was willing to scrub toilets on campus if it meant that his sons would receive a tuition waiver. Financial concerns became just one more barrier to overcome. These statements offer important considerations for outreach programs. Parents concerns' about financing college provides outreach programs with opportunities to have in-depth discussions beyond the costs of college and into the financial aid application process and the requirements for maintaining aid.

Conflicts between aspirations and limitations were also present. These conflicts manifested around where students should attend college. Most parents in the study associated college either with the university that sponsored the outreach program or with elite institutions, as illustrated in the following statement:

No, I have always given her all the options. She is going to Harvard. She is going to Yale. She is going to Princeton. She is going to [the local university]. I think now she is more excited about going to the [local university] than anything else because I don't know too much about the other schools. I just know that they are far away so I am more leaning that she is going to be at the [local university]. (Valerie, 2007 [accounts receivable specialist, daughter aged 7])

Families clearly valued their children pursuing a college education; however, a few limitations were presented. Not only were some college aspirations limited to local institutions and Ivy League universities, but their knowledge of these Ivy League programs was of name only. Torres and Hernandez (2007) described this conflict as support "provided for education, but not for changing the status quo within the family" (p. 570). This is associated with the uneasiness that families feel with their children's leaving home and enrolling in a college or university of which they know little to nothing about. These examples illustrate the complexity of families' aspirations about where their children should attend college. Staying close to or

living at home represents a cultural strength of these families and provides the opportunity for their children to continue to draw on family and community resources while in school. It also represents the fear that mothers might have in losing the closeness with their children as they contemplate moving away (Auerbach, 2007). The complexity of this issue is developed in the following conversation with a mother:

JMK: Do you have a preference about where they should go to school?

MOTHER: There's nothing wrong with the [local university] so I prefer that.

JMK: If they were to get a scholarship out of state—

MOTHER: I would really be scared. I would be scared because you can't protect your kid when they are so far away, but I would rather for them to go cause I don't want kids that depend on mommy for everything. So if they wanted to, it would break my heart but I want them to learn. I want them to live on their own and not regret—I wish I did this, you know. (Danielle, 2007 [corrections officer, children aged 7 and 6])

The Parent Outreach Program was successful in establishing a college connection for families in the program. The connection to the local university was key in the creation of their college path, as families felt secure with, and formed positive perceptions of, the local university. Families left the program with a strong loyalty to the sponsoring university and with knowledge of the local community college; however, they had limited knowledge about other educational options. Granted, there were exceptions, as previously presented, but those exceptions represented college knowledge that was already present in the families' range of information.

*Symbols as potential limiting factors.* It is clear that cultural symbols are influential factors in shaping educational ideologies. One final symbol came to signify the Parent Outreach Program and was intended to serve as a resource and physical guide for parents. The following examples center on the "red book," a notebook given to parents during the Parent Outreach Program containing college tips, handouts, Web sites, and various university resources. Responses referencing the notebook were typically shared during questions about the content of the information that parents received during the program and about how parents would find future college information. One mother indicated that the notebook served as a refresher: "I think the red book was pretty helpful. I read it every time I needed to refresh my memory on things." She also understood that if she needed future college information, she could visit any of the Web sites listed: "Plus I would go back to the red book if it could help me. I know there are a lot of resources in there as far as Web sites that I could go to." This book represented parents' successful experience in the outreach program and a primary source of college information. As one mother mentioned, "I have it all written down in my notes, everything. It was great that we had

that notebook to keep up with the [program]. . . . If we ever have to go back to it, it's there." A grandfather explained to me,

And I don't know where my wife has the notebook because I could bring some of that stuff up, but I don't know where she has the notebook. It may be in her satchel, she carries it around with her all the time. (Rogelio, 2004)

The red book served as a means to organize all the important documents and information presented during the program. In carrying the book around, college information became a part of families' daily lives, a resource readily available. While it is concerning that family members might rely solely on the book and the people and information listed in it, the book provides parents with the opportunity to obtain information on their own, thus enacting their agency. It is also concerning that information may change or become outdated within a few years, including the people serving in specific positions and the admissions requirements. The likelihood of information changing or becoming outdated is high, yet families demonstrated great resourcefulness and knowledge when it came to learning about educational processes. Families did not talk about how they might build on the concepts within the book. However, I believe that this book provided families with an outline from which they could begin constructing a college plan. Rather than become a symbol that turns into a source of misinformation, the red book may represent the basis of expanding college knowledge and the beginnings of a collegiate social network.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study considered the development and future influence of educational ideologies. The educational ideologies outlined here highlight the ways in which ideologies were formed, particularly around college-going processes. College information came from social networks and from academic symbols that were part of families' everyday lives. Ideologies manifested as being both helpful and hurtful. Despite the educational limitations in families, their sense of college as a realistic goal was present.

This study is significant for several reasons, as it extends our understanding of the college aspiration and college choice process for Mexican American students. Findings from this study support and extend previous research about these processes for first-generation and Mexican American students. The examples presented in this article exemplify what Valenzuela (1999) characterizes as *educación*, a notion that highlights the role of family in creating a sense of "moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning" (p. 23). As illustrated, families' embodiment of *educación* respected formal education and demonstrated the importance of reciprocal social relations. Thus, *educación*

complements the funds of knowledge framework. Findings from this study also extend the discussion on funds of knowledge beyond traditional K–12 literature, as this study represents one of the first that utilizes this framework when studying issues of college access. Likewise, outreach literature is also extended, as the findings present new opportunities for engaging family members in culturally relevant ways. Finally, the use of funds of knowledge with cultural and social capital illustrate the importance of considering a theoretical overlap, especially when understanding social relationships, networks, and issues of access and power.

### **Reframing Deficits**

As researchers, we continue to recommend that parents be incorporated into students' educational experiences. As practitioners, we continue to seek ways to involve parents. However, I assert that we must step back from this process and dismantle the deficit perspective. If we continue to assume that parents and families are lacking in experience, knowledge, and educational attainment, we will overlook the inherent resources that are present in these families and will continue to blame families for creating limitations around their educational ideologies. We must begin to understand families from a more balanced perspective. Yes, they value education; yes, they want their children to attend college. However, these aspirations are complex and sometimes incomplete, as steps required to achieve these goals can be misunderstood or unknown. On the flip side, we must also consider how K–12 teachers and administrators, outreach programs, policy makers, actors within higher education, and the relevant literature might also serve as limiting factors.

It is naïve to assume that there are no limiting factors present in families. It is equally naïve to assume that various educational actors do not play a role in perpetuating those limitations and deficits. For example, we must question if the responsibility of outreach programs is to teach parents about the range of educational options or to serve as a recruiting tool for the sponsoring university. I believe that both can successfully be accomplished. Understanding of and loyalty to the sponsoring university will develop as part of the various on-campus experiences and university speakers offered through the program. This can be supplemented with additional information about the range of college choices available. By adopting a more critical view of the role that organizations play and by developing a more complete understanding of the inherent resources present in underrepresented families, perhaps we can achieve larger gains in the college-going rates for these students.

### **Programmatic Recommendations**

Funds of knowledge can be an effective pedagogical tool, taking into account the knowledge and resources of students at K–12 levels. However, despite many recommendations to incorporate parents in school

systems and outreach programs, there is a gap in the practical application as well as in the literature illustrating programs that utilize comprehensive methods of incorporating parents. If the funds of knowledge of families are not being valued and utilized, parents may not realize their own resources, may not develop the confidence to help their children with educational processes, and may fail to tap into their own experiences to help their children succeed.

Before presenting recommendations, I first acknowledge the constraints that outreach programs face. Given national, state, and institutional policies and budgets, outreach programs are generally one of the first targeted for the chopping block, and they are continually asked to do more (serve larger numbers) with less (budget and personnel). These programs operate with the dual challenge of decreasing resources and maintaining legitimacy by increasing access for populations that do not have high college-going rates.

Findings from this study present an opportunity to build on the work that outreach programs are already doing. These recommendations are not meant to serve as *the* solution for successfully incorporating families into outreach programs; however, they can be used to expand on the notion of cultural integrity and further incorporate families from a nondeficit perspective.

It was clear that families in this study clearly tapped into a well-established social network for information and resources. Outreach programs should help parents utilize their extensive social networks as a means of practicing and activating social capital. This social capital can be used to navigate both the K–12 and the higher education contexts. It was also evident that families possessed considerable information regarding college-going processes. Encouraging family members to share and build on that information during outreach program sessions is critical. Doing so would build family members' confidence when seeking new information and resources, as certain resources regarding college preparation may become out of date or evolve over time. To keep materials relevant for family members, outreach programs might offer structured and continuous follow-up with former participants, if parents are expected to continue to incorporate new information, strategies, and college conversations into their daily activities. By offering continuous follow-up, outreach programs have the opportunity to address the persistent rates of underrepresented students once they begin college. Families would leave these programs with key information about getting into college and improving graduation rates once in college. These recommendations represent an opportunity to utilize funds of knowledge in a new, untapped way, and they provide a contribution to the effort of effecting change in the structure of education.

### **Future Research**

Many questions remained unanswered. The interviews with study participants were conducted during their time in a university outreach program.

Participants have not been followed up, to determine where their children are on the collegiate path. Therefore, it is unclear what type of influence outreach initiatives such as the Parent Outreach Program have on future college access opportunities. Future research should examine how and if those funds of knowledge are being converted into concrete educational opportunities for children throughout the course of their K–12 experience and into and out of their college experiences. Follow-up and ongoing research with families should also examine how educational ideologies shift over time based on experiences, outreach initiatives, and familial funds of knowledge.

This research represents one of the first studies to utilize funds of knowledge as a means of understanding families and outreach programs in higher education. Additional research is necessary to understand the utility of funds of knowledge in access and outreach programs and in underrepresented families while in college, not only on the path to college. This research should include diverse families from a variety of outreach initiatives, as most funds of knowledge studies focus primarily on Latino immigrant communities.

Finally, this study examined family aspirations based on a multiple-case-study design. It would be beneficial in the future to examine family aspirations and student aspirations separately to better understand how educational ideologies influence the college-going process for Mexican American youth. While children were included in limited conversations for this study, they were not the focus of the interviews. Many outreach programs, including the Parent Outreach Program, provide concurrent outreach sessions for students while parents are attending workshops. Future research might focus on both the parent and the student elements. By investigating aspirations separately, one might better understand how and if college aspirations from family members are transferred and so develop into college aspirations for their youth.

## **Conclusion**

One of the most difficult challenges that we experience as educators and researchers is to understand the realities that low-income and underrepresented families often face. It is not merely a question of encouraging or supporting children's education. There are realities behind what is often perceived to be a lack involvement or lack of interest. In fact, we see that it is rarely an either-or question for these families, and as previous research on underrepresented students highlight—lack of information does not mean lack of interest. The same is true for the families in this study. It is important to study and represent families from an asset-based perspective. However, it is challenging to allow the limiting factors to also be exposed. I would add one amendment to the message above—lack of information does not mean lack of interest, nor does it mean lack of value for education. In fact, the



families in this study had not only strong educational values and rich ideologies about education but also important pieces of educational information that just needed to be woven together. Our role as educators, practitioners, and researchers is to ensure that it happens.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The terminology used for persons of Latin American origin is sensitive. For the sake of clarity, I refer to study participants as *Mexican American*, as families represented those of Mexican heritage born in the United States. In doing so, I highlight experiences specific to Mexican Americans, further illustrating the diversity within the larger Mexican subgroup. Literature referencing Mexicans often includes Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. In 2000, the Mexican subgroup made up about 58% of the total Latinos in the United States (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004). When referencing literature, I noted that the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* were used interchangeably. I have not substituted those terms for any other descriptor to maintain the integrity of the literature being referenced.

<sup>2</sup>I draw on a definition of *educational aspirations* developed by Quaglia and Cobb (1996), summarized as “a student’s ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals” (p. 130).

<sup>3</sup>*Ideologies* refers to an integrated or comprehensive set of ideas or perspectives. I look specifically at educational ideologies, comprehensive perspectives about education, and the college-going process. In developing this working definition of educational ideologies, I draw from sociological research on ideologies that looks at the nature and extent of the distribution of particular ideas (Cheal, 1979).

<sup>4</sup>To maintain anonymity, “Parent Outreach Program” is a pseudonym. This program is coordinated through the university’s outreach office and represents a collaborative relationship between the university and a local school district. All the elementary schools within the district participate in the Parent Outreach Program.

<sup>5</sup>One mother identified as African American. Her children were biracial: African American and Mexican American. She described her family as identifying with the Mexican American culture and community because of their geographic location and their close involvement with her husband’s Mexican American family.

<sup>6</sup>The names of all participants, their family members, and any local identifiers have been changed to maintain anonymity.

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