“PA’ TRA’ NI PA’ COGER IMPULSO”: PARENTAL INFLUENCES ON THE EDUCATION JOURNEY OF LOW-INCOME LATINO MALES WHO “MADE IT” TO A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Latino males from low-income backgrounds have one of the highest high school dropout rates and lowest college enrollment and graduation rates in the United States. Like many disadvantaged students, low-income Latino males face multi-systemic obstacles that limit them from realizing their full potential in the current education system. Yet, despite the odds against them, many successfully navigate the education pipeline. How do they do it, and in what ways do their families influence their educational journeys? As part of a larger study on academic resilience, this investigation examines the role of parents in the educational success of low-income Latino men. Eleven men in their first-year at a four-year university participated in three individual interviews and one focus group interview. Three parental influences emerged: 1) Parents’ expressed commitment to their children’s education; 2) Parents as role models and sources of motivation; and 3) Interdependent family relationships. These results highlight the various ways that low-income Latino parents – often overworked and undereducated themselves – can propel, rather than hinder, academic success among their children. This work contributes to the emerging body of research that challenge deficit-based, victim-blaming conceptualizations of low-income Latino parents and their involvement in their children’s education.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Latinos in the United States: Demographic and Educational Trends

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing bicultural population in the United States. The 2010 Census counted 50.5 million Latinos, making up 16.3% of the total population. The nation’s Latino population – which was 35.3 million in 2000 and represented 12.5% of the total population – grew 43%, or four times the nation's growth rate, over the decade. The Latino population also accounted for 56% of the nation’s growth from 2000 to 2010 (Motel, 2012). In four states – California, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona – Latinos make up over one-third of the population in 2010, and are projected to be the majority in those states by 2025 (Motel, 2012).

Unfortunately, Latinos also continue to represent the largest undereducated population of the nation. For example, in 2010, 36% of all Latinos ages 18 and older did not complete high school or equivalent education, compared to 9% of white adults, 11% for adults of Asian origin, and 17% of black adults (U.S. Census, 2010). Among 18- to 24-year-olds – whose outcomes better reflect the recent performance of the education system – about one-third of the Latino population did not complete high school or equivalent, compared to 24% of blacks, 15% of whites, and 12% of Asians in the same age bracket (U.S. Census, 2010). Additionally, while college enrollment rates of Latinos have increased from 20% in 2000 to 31.1% in 2010 (Motel, 2012), young Latino adults continue to be the least educated major racial or ethnic group in terms of completion of a bachelor’s degree. For example, approximately half of college-going Latinos (18 to 24 years of age) enroll at 2-year (rather than 4-year) colleges (Fry, 2011). Additionally, in 2010, only 13% of 25- to 29-year-old Latinos had completed at least a bachelor’s degree. In comparison, 53% of Asians, 39% of whites, and 19% of blacks in the same
age group completed a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census, 2010). Moreover, although both whites and blacks show steady growth in college completion rates since 1975, the growth in four-year degrees for Latinos has remained virtually flat (Fry, 2011).

Consistent with national gender trends across ethnic/racial groups, the educational disparities between Latino men and women have increased over the years. For example, in 2010, 34% of Latino men between the ages of 18 and 24 have not completed high school or equivalent degree, compared to 27% of Latinas, 14% of Asian men, 17% of white men, and 27% of black men in the same age group (U.S. Census, 2010). Furthermore, only 11% of Latino men between the ages of 25 and 29 have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 17% of Latinas, 52% of Asian men, 35% of white men, and 15% of black men in the same age group (U.S. Census, 2010). Overall, the combined educational statistics suggest that our education system is failing to meet the educational needs of Latino males.

The failure over more than three decades to make sufficient progress in moving more Latino students successfully through college has enormous economic consequences for the United States, as the job market continues to demand more education and Latinos, particularly males, continue to make up a greater portion of the workforce. For example, based on reports from the Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Gandara and Contreras (2009) state that by 2020 California will experience an 11% decrease in per capita income, if the state’s effectiveness in preparing more bicultural students for higher education does not improve. They articulate that to understand the deleterious effects of such a decline in per capita earnings, it is useful to know that the present-day struggling economy of California is actually the result of a 30% increase in per capita income since 1980. And while California is projected to experience
the largest economic decline because of its very large and undereducated Latino communities, other states with high percentages of Latinos are also projected to see declines in per capita income by 2020 (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Thus the education of the large and growing Latino population is inextricably linked to the economic future of the United States:

*The current data do not give cause for optimism, for they show that the demands of contemporary American society are outpacing the ability of post-immigrant generations of Latinos to overcome the educational and socioeconomic barriers they confront .... With no evidence of an imminent turnaround in the rate at which Latino students are either graduating from high school or obtaining college degrees, it appears that both a regional and national catastrophe are at hand .... As a group, Latino students today perform academically at levels that will consign them to live as members of a permanent underclass in American society. Moreover, their situation is projected to worsen over time .... If their situation is not reversed, the very democracy is at peril.* (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, pp. 2, 5, 304)

**Who are Latinos?**

Before presenting existing research on the academic barriers faced by Latino students, and Latino males in particular, it is important to clarify who Latinos are. The term Latino, synonymous with the contentious government designation of Hispanic, is a generic classification for a diverse multicultural and a multiracial population comprised of individuals from 20 countries from the Caribbean, North, Central, and South America, and Spain (Marin & Marin, 1991). According to the 2010 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census (Motel, 2012), Latinos of Mexican origin accounted for 65% of the Latino population in the U.S., followed by Puerto Ricans (9%), Cubans (4%), Salvadorans (3.5%) and Dominicans (3%).

In addition to country of origin, Latino subgroups vary in their migration experiences, educational backgrounds, social and economic conditions, and expression of the Spanish language (Cauce & Domenech Rodriguez, 2002). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that
within-group differences among Latinos can account for similar and contrasting experiences (see Parra Cardona, Cordova, Holtrop, Villarruel, & Wieling, 2008), and thus any single statement indicating a general attribute about Latinos can be highly misleading. Furthermore, while research suggests that there are many commonalities among Latino subgroups – including a shared language and shared cultural values such as strong family cohesion and high respect for authority figures (see Marin & Marin, 1991) – much of the existing literature pertaining to Latinos is based on studies with poor to working class individuals of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent (Cauce & Domenech Rodriguez, 2002). Thus, we know less about Latinos from other ethnic groups or from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

An additional qualification in this text is the use of the term *bicultural* instead of *minority* when describing ethnically and racially diverse students. According to critical education scholar Antonia Darder, the term *minority* perpetuates a political view of non-Euroamerican cultures as deficient and disempowered. The term *bicultural*, on the other hand, more accurately reflects the fact that working class students of color must constantly navigate and negotiate at least two distinct cultural/class systems that often have opposing values and worldviews (Darder, 2011).

**Barriers to Academic Success for all Latina/o Students**

*Poor children do not drop out of school; they don’t leave school because they want to….it is the very structures of society that create a serious set of barriers and difficulties, some in solidarity with others, that result in enormous obstacles for the children of subordinate classes to come to school.* (Freire, 1993, p. 30)

*For the large majority of bicultural students, schooling in the United States is structured to limit individual choice by defining well-specified and uncreative roles in the social and economic hierarchy…while ignoring the needs of students. Schooling is therefore a colonizing device…it serves to limit the control bicultural students can ultimately have over their own lives.* (Darder, 2011, p.7)
What explains the academic underachievement of Latino students? As the above quotes by Paulo Freire and Antonia Darder suggest, the answer is complex and multifaceted. In general, most Latinos in the United States face multi-systemic obstacles that limit them from realizing their full potential in the current education system. These obstacles can be grouped into two (not mutually exclusive) categories: systemic socioeconomic and ethnic discrimination.

**Socioeconomic Discrimination**

One of the most steady findings in the social sciences is the positive relationship between economic and education variables. Specifically, educational research has consistently found economic status to be an important contributor to academic outcomes (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Lacour & Tissington, 2011), and economic research has shown that education strongly affects earnings (see Gilbet, 2002; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Hence, any group with high levels of poverty is likely to have high levels of academic underachievement. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) – an alternative metric that uses a wider range of factors than the official federal measure to determine poverty status – Latinos have the highest poverty rate in the United States. Specifically, the poverty rate of Latinos (28%) is almost double the nations’ poverty rate (16%), and exceeds that of whites (11%), Asians (17%), and blacks (25%; Lopez and Cohn, 2011). However, even this high rate is an underestimation since it does not reflect the financially obligations that many Latinos have in their countries of origin.

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a multifinality risk factor. That is, its influence is associated with many different maladaptive outcomes, such as academic underachievement and physical and mental health problems (Barrera et al., 2002; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov,
1994; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLoyd, 1998; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). In terms of education, we know from the existing literature that economic disadvantage affects academic life via the resources that are available to these students in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. For example, economic deprivation frequently coexists with other risk factors such as residence in dangerous neighborhoods plagued with violence, gang activity, and drug trade; school environments that are segregated, overcrowded, and poorly funded; and single parenthood and/or parents with limited education (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Roosa, Jones, Tein, & Cree, 2003). In other words, low-income families, neighborhoods, and schools are not allocated sufficient resources to provide their students with the necessary atmosphere to promote college attendance plans and the steps to achieve those plans. Instead, these students are embedded in economically deprived contexts that undermine their capacity to concentrate, their sense of security, and their ability to learn.

Why does this socioeconomic discrimination exist? Critical education scholars (e.g., Darder, 2002; 2011; Darder, Torres, & Guiterres, 1995; Fine, 1991; Fine & Burns, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; 2005) have argued that this is the direct result, and express intent, of capitalist economic policy to maintain social class advantages. Specifically, they argue that the education system in the United States is used to channel upper-income students into higher-status occupations, and lower-income students into low-status occupations (with little hope of upward mobility). What maintains this biased system is the deception that students are sorted according to supposed intellectual ability. This widely accepted myth, in turn, operates to convince the general population (including the victims) that lower-income students “deserve” lower status jobs because of their own failure to perform adequately on tests (which are devised to highlight
the skills and attributes of the middle class). Largely ignored is the systematic class and ethnic discrimination that preclude bicultural students from gaining the adequate preparation to compete for jobs with their upper income peers.

**Ethnic Discrimination**

Most immigrants in the United States came to this country for the chance of a better life, greater opportunities, employment, and education for their children. They believe in the American Dream; that is, in the open system of mobility that affords success and prosperity to anyone who is willing to work hard enough to get it (Hill & Torres, 2010). However, the obstacles typically faced by non-European immigrants – language barriers, individual and institutional discrimination, poverty, and clashing worldviews – are difficult to overcome and often continue to impact their native born lineage. In fact, later generations of Latinos at times perform less well than do first-generation Latinos. For example, first-generation students have higher achievement motivation (Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2010), hold stronger beliefs about the value of education (Perreira et al., 2010; Stamps & Bohon, 2006), and perceive fewer barriers to reaching their goals (Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003). A number of scholars have explained this paradox as stemming from a decrease in the hope for the American Dream. In other words, the hope for upward mobility among Latino immigrants decreases across generation and with increasing time in the United States (Orozco, Gaytan, Kim, 2010). This diminished hope stems from the realization that the American Dream is an “elusive carrot” for most non-Euroamerican people; a false vision that overlooks the systemic disadvantages that place people of color in the perpetual underclass (Darder, 2011).
The systemic cultural ambush of Latino populations is evident in all areas in our society, including media portrayals of Latinos as unskilled, irrational, and lazy (Valdivia, 2010); anti-immigration policies and practices that deny basic human rights to unauthorized immigrants and their native born children; biased reports that blame the economic downfall of this country on increases in Latino immigration, while conveniently ignoring corporate greed and the tax breaks of the superclass (Darder, 2011); and schooling policies and practices – such as ARS 15-122 in Arizona and the “rewriting” of American history by the Texas School Board – that eradicate “cultural studies” and all forms of scholarship that portray white people in a negative light (Darder, 2011). It is in this broader oppressive context that Latinos, and other bicultural students, navigate the education pipeline. It is in this discriminatory context that Latinos are, for example, disproportionally placed in lower education tracks, retained at various grade levels, and diagnosed with learning and behavioral disorders (Darder et al., 1996; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Valenzuela, 2005). Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand scholars who argue that Latino dropouts are not incapable students who lack motivation, but rather, products of a school system that often fails to acknowledge their cultural strengths, ignores their native language, and offers a curriculum that is meaningless within the context of their lived experiences (e.g., Darder et al., 1996; Reyes Cruz, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valenzuela, 2005). In other words, much like their immigrant ancestors, Latino students are victims of the tragic unresponsiveness of a society that does not value them and denies them the opportunity to “reflect, critique, and act to transform the conditions under which they live” (Darder, 2011, p. xx).
Why are Latino Males Vanishing from the Educational Pipeline?

Given the apparent gaps in high school completion, college enrollment, and degree attainment rates of Latino men, it is critical to address the phenomenon of the “vanishing Latino male” in the education system (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The general research literature on Latino males contains a plethora of deficiency-focused articles on issues of violence (e.g., gang related), aggression, unhealthy machismo, and drug and alcohol abuse (for review, see Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; Noguera & Hurtado, 2012; and Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). There is less research on the broader systemic influences that have made it increasingly difficult for Latino males to achieve their full academic potential. In the paragraphs that follow, I argue that much of the gender disparities in the education rates among Latinos can be attributed to 1) educational advances among women and girls; 2) the assault on men and boys of color by the criminal justice system; and 3) cultural expectations – in the Latino as well as in the dominant U.S. culture – that men are the primary breadwinner in their families.

Educational Advances among Women and Girls

One of the many benefits of the feminist movement in the 60s and 70s is that it increased the participation of women in different segments of our society (e.g., education, politics, business, etc.). And while the major beneficiaries have been middle- and upper-class white women, women of color and from lower socioeconomic status have also benefited from feminist efforts. For example, in a 2008 report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) the authors documented the ways that a variety of educational initiatives have been effectively implemented over the years to increase the academic achievement of all girls and women in the United States (Corbett, Hill, & Rose, 2008). Among women of color, the increases
in educational attainment are particularly dramatic because they started from such a low base (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). On the other hand, because white men did not need a social and legal movement to enhance their already structurally privileged position, no comparable movement arose over the same time period from which Latino men could indirectly benefit (Hurtado, Haney & Hurtado, 2012). Consequently, the proportion of Latino men who go to college has not changed substantially in the last few decades. Therefore, most of the gender divide in education is not caused by males losing ground so much as by females gaining it (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

It is also important to note that although male privilege is a certainty within the broader societal context, this privilege is (for the most part) afforded to wealthy white men who currently and historically wield most of the power in American society (Noguera & Hurtado, 2012). To assume, for example, that Latino males have an advantage over white females is to ignore the racialized and classist context that privileges some masculinities (i.e., white men) while oppressing others (i.e., men of color). To be clear, low-income Latino men have always been limited in their access to opportunities for upward mobility in the United States. Their present-day underperformance in the education pipeline is simply an indication of their perpetual marginalization. Hence, the call is not to focus on Latino male students at the exclusion of Latinas, but rather to better understand the unique educational challenges faced by each (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009)
Criminalization of Men of Color

No meaningful analysis of educational achievement among Latino men can ignore the impact and influence of the criminal justice system. At the same time that Latino males are underrepresented in the education pipeline, they are overrepresented in the prison pipeline. For example, according to a report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Latinos make up 21% of the 2.1 million male inmates in federal, state, and local prisons; and approximately 63% of them are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Sabol, Minton, & Harrison, 2007). In addition, the ratio of Latino males in jail to those in college dormitories is 2.7 to 1 (Sabol et al., 2007). And this number may actually be higher than accounted for by reporting agencies because of inconsistencies in racial/ethnic identification (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

The overrepresentation of men of color in penal institutions is so widespread that it has given rise to an acronym among corrections professionals – disproportionate minority confinement (DMC; Hurtado, et al., 2012). In her latest book, The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander (2010) argues that the extraordinary imprisonment of black and Latino men is not a result of greater crime rates within these populations, but rather, a result of policies and practices at every stage of the criminal justice system that essentially guarantee discriminatory results. For example, men of color are more likely to be surveyed, stopped, and arrested by the police, and face stricter punishment than whites for similar crimes. Additionally, Alexander argues that specific policies and practices pertaining to the “War on Drugs” – e.g., harsher punishment for possession of crack vs. cocaine, higher surveillance and “stop and frisk” searchers in low-income neighborhoods, and monetary incentives that favor, for example, the arrest of many individuals for possession of marijuana versus a few individuals for the distribution of “hardcore” drugs –
account for the massive increase in the imprisonment of men of color. Moreover, when these men are labeled as “troublesome,” they typically lack the resources and “connections” to buffer them from the damaging outcomes of the criminal justice system. (Alexander, 2010).

Unfortunately, present trends in federal and state spending do not give hope for the overhaul of this form of “legalized discrimination” (Alexander, 2010). At a national level, correctional budgets have ballooned while the construction of educational institutions and funding for educational programs has been reduced. This is particularly evident in states with high percentages of Latinos, such as California, which appear to have consciously chosen to invest in prisons at the expense of schools, and to privilege policies on incarceration over education for many students of color (Hurtado, et al., 2012). In addition, the number of inner-city schools that physically and psychologically resemble prisons is at an all-time high (Schnyder, 2010). Taken together, these patterns demonstrate the existence of a systemic assault against men of color. Young Latino and black men are especially vulnerable to this ever-expanding reach of the criminal justice system that, according to Alexander (2010), seeks to create a permanent undercaste based largely on race:

_In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as justification for discrimination, exclusion, or social contempt. Rather, we use our criminal-justice system to associate criminality with people of color and then engage in the prejudiced practices we supposedly left behind. Today, it is legal to discriminate against ex-offenders in ways it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you’re labeled a felon, depending on the state you’re in, the old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, and exclusion from jury service – are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights and arguably less respect than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it_ (p.2)
Cultural Expectation that Men are Primary Breadwinners

While the participation of women in the workforce has increased dramatically since the peak of the feminist movement, the cultural narrative which places men as the primary breadwinner of the home is still prevalent in the U.S. This is especially true for Latinos. For example, the expectations for the Latino male to work in order to contribute to the family’s well-being remains a salient experience for many, as does the role of the stay-at-home caregiver for Latina females (Cauce & Domenech Rodriguez, 2002; Marin & Marin, 1991; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstorm, 2002). This also means that Latino males are more likely to join the workforce immediately after high school instead of pursuing a college degree. However, low education levels among Latino male workers often translates into higher concentrations in low-skilled jobs (e.g., construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and retail services) and lower concentrations in high-skilled occupations (e.g., architecture, engineering, legal, sciences, and health care), thus perpetuating a vicious cycle of economic deprivation (Maldonado & Farmer 2006; Nogura & Hurtado, 2012).

Against this backdrop, a popular explanation for the academic underachievement of Latino males is that their low-income parents expect them to work and contribute to the family income, which in turn diminishes the time and energy these students can dedicate to school. This and similar explanations – no matter how “culturally sensitive” the manner in which they are presented – essentially blame the victims for their own problems (Ryan, 1971). Such explanations problematize what is actually an adaptive, resilient response to the oppressive conditions that prevent their parents from earning a decent, livable wage in the first place. Hence, the problem is not that Latino parents push their sons into the labor force prematurely – which
incidentally is not the case for the majority of Latino students (e.g., Ceballo, 2004; Gandara, 1995; Lopez, 2001; Reyes Cruz, 2008) – but rather, that these parents tend to work in occupations that pay low wages, provide low economic mobility, provide little or no health insurance, are less stable, and are more hazardous to their health and well-being (Maldonado & Farmer 2006). Also missing from these victim-blaming analyses, are considerations of the outrageous increases in college costs and decreases in financial aid that make a 4-year college education, even at public institutions, essentially impossible for most low-income students. Thus, the historically high participation rates of Latino males in the “unskilled” U.S. labor force should not be viewed as the cause for their low education rates, but rather as the result of a lack of opportunities to do anything else. As Torres and colleagues (2002) state, “Latino men are often confronted with the male gender role demands of the dominant culture yet are denied economic and political access to its resources” (p. 167). Faced with the financial struggles of their families, many Latino men (and to a lesser extent women) are left with no option but to join the workforce and forego higher education.

What about the Latino Students who Succeed?

A natural question that is not often addressed in the literature is this: given the various systemic challenges that limit the educational opportunities for low-income Latinos, how is it that some “make it” to 4-year colleges and beyond? The growing, yet limited, literature on academic resilience suggests two main contexts that play a significant role in promoting educational success among students whose color and zip code place them “at-risk” – the high school they attend and the family environment in which they are embedded.
The High School Microsystem

The resources of the high school – both within and outside the school walls – impact students’ capacity to succeed. No matter how intelligent and motivated the student, they simply cannot succeed without adequate opportunities and the help of others (Halx & Ortiz, 2011; Morales & Troutman, 2010). While the majority of the available literature on academic resilience concentrates on student characteristics (e.g., intelligence, study habits, motivation, etc.), we know that the school context plays a significant, if not greater, role. Factors such as the school’s overall structure (both physically and its locality); the management; the role of teachers and their interaction with students; the school’s opportunities, such as advanced college preparatory curriculum and programing, extracurricular activities, and community service; and the peer networks available all shape students academically and socially to prepare them for postsecondary education (see Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). This is especially the case for low-income students of color, who often have limited resources outside the school context to draw from.

In a qualitative study of 50 Mexican-origin individuals who – despite growing up in poverty – received a Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. from prestigious U.S. universities, Gandara (1995) found that the majority of the participants (70%) attended high-resourced middle to upper-middle class schools where at least half of the students were white. Furthermore, all of the participants in the study noted that they were (eventually) tracked into college-preparatory courses when they were in high school. This suggests that the students who did not attend high-resourced schools nevertheless attended high schools that offered an advance academic curriculum. Additionally 50% of the individuals interviewed identified a teacher or other school staff member as a mentor...
who encouraged and supported the participants in their educational goals. In a longitudinal study that focused on the individual characteristics of 50 academically resilient African-American and Latino students, Morales and Trotman (2011) identified the influential role of formal and informal mentors in high school and college. They state: “The importance of these influential adults for the students in this study cannot be underestimated. In essence, these individuals served as social capital, providing the students with insights and access to academia” (p.69). Similarly, in a qualitative study of academic resilience among 10 first-generation, U.S.-born, Latino students attending Yale University (Ceballo 2004), all participants included at least one teacher when asked to name the three most influential people during their high school years. All participants also reported that they were highly involved in an average of four school-based extracurricular activities (e.g., choirs, bands, drama, sports, student government, and academic clubs). Together, the existing empirical studies pertaining to the academic resilience provide evidence for the importance of high school resources in promoting college-going aspirations and preparation for poor bicultural students.

The Family Microsystem

A substantial literature exists which has demonstrated that family background accounts for a large portion of the variance in educational outcomes (for review, see Henderson & Mapp, 2002; and Jeynes, 2007). For example, socioeconomic status (usually defined as some combination of educational and occupational status of parents) is the single most powerful contributor to students’ education outcomes (Lacour & Tissington, 2011), specifically because – as discussed in the socioeconomic discrimination section – the U.S. education system is not designed to facilitate the success of low-income populations. However, in the vast majority of
the parental involvement literature the structural barriers faced by low-income Latino parents are obscured. Without such understanding, we are left with victim-blaming explanations that place the responsibility for the underachievement of Latino students on their families, particularly their parents’ deficits (e.g., their lack of proficiency with the English language, their limited familiarity with American educational systems, and their demanding work schedules).
Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates the various ways that Latino parents – poor, overworked, and undereducated themselves – help their children successfully navigate the U.S. education pipeline.

For example, increasing research demonstrates that poor immigrant parents strongly believe education is the ticket to fulfilling the American Dream, and thus stress to their children the importance of hard work and determination in their schooling. In an ethnographic study of a migrant/immigrant family in Texas whose children consistently maintained high levels of academic achievement, Gerardo Lopez (2001) challenged the view that effective parental involvement was the performance of specific scripted school activities. Rather, Lopez describes how the Padilla parents understood involvement as instilling in their children the value of education through the “medium of hard work.” Specifically, Lopez argues that while exposing their children to their work in the fields, the Padilla parents were simultaneously teaching them three important “real-life” lessons: 1) to become acquainted with the type of work they do; 2) to recognize that this work is difficult, strenuous, and without adequate compensation; and 3) to realize that without an education they may end up working in a similar type of job. At the time Lopez conducted the interviews, all five of the Padilla children had great success in school. They were all among the top graduates of their high school classes and were in college pursuing
careers in medicine, business, and science. These findings were particularly impressive considering that their education was repeatedly interrupted by constant migration and that their parents hardly ever visited their schools or assisted them with their school work. In a four-year ethnographic study of immigrant Mexican parents in school reform, Reyes Cruz (2008) reported similar examples of how parents instill in their children the value of education. One mother in the study commented:

*I always use myself as an example. I tell them, “I don’t want you to get home from work tired like me. Look how my feet hurt.” Little details like that, you understand? So then what I want is that they see me as an example, perhaps not one to follow, you know, or maybe to follow on some things. But I want a different life for them...I don’t want my children to go through what I went through, that the opportunities that I could have had are taken away from them* (p. 86).

Studies that elicited the perspective of academically resilient Latina/os also demonstrate the critical role of parents in promoting and supporting educational success. For example, in her study of 50 Mexican-origin individuals who “beat the odds” in receiving terminal degrees, Gandara (1995) found that while none of the participants described their parents as being active in their schools, all of them reported that their parents were critical in their educational success by being involved in a number of ways – such as instilling the value of hard work; verbal support and encouragement for educational undertakings; creating an environment for achievement (e.g., promoting literacy in the home, helping with school work when possible, and foregoing children’s economic contributions); expressing high academic and economic aspirations for their children; and using family stories of lost fortunes to convey to their children that the current circumstances in which they lived (e.g., poverty) were not those in which they needed to remain. Similarly, in a qualitative study that explored the interconnections between family processes and the academic success of 10 low-income Latino students who “made it” to Yale, Ceballo (2004)
identified three ways in which parents conveyed their unconditional commitment to their children’s education: verbal declarations about the importance of education, support of children’s autonomy in educational matters, and nonverbal expressions of support for academic work, such as not allowing their children to work so that they can concentrate on their school work. In a study of 186 Mexican American men at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution in the Southwest, Ojeda and colleagues (2010) found that the combination of parental encouragement to attend and complete college (e.g., families pride in their academic pursuits) and high levels of *familismo* (a Latino cultural value that encompasses the loyalty, commitment, and dedication to the family; see Cauce & Domenech Rodriguez, 2002) had a significant positive effect on the students’ college persistence intentions. Additionally, a qualitative study conducted with 11 Latina/o college students investigated the development of resiliency and found that these students also identified parental support and encouragement of educational pursuits as critical to their educational success (Cavazos et al., 2010).

Together, the growing literature that examines academic resilience – from the perspective of the students as well as their parents – highlights the important ways that many low-income Latino parents, often with limited formal education themselves, change the dismal education trajectory likely for their children.

**What is Missing in the Existing Literature?**

Given the importance of a four-year college degree for social mobility in the U.S., (see Gilbet, 2002; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) the alarming high school dropout rates of Latinos, particularly men, presents a national crisis that warrants increased scholarly and political attention. Specifically, greater attention needs to be paid to the systemic forces at the macro-
level, including socioeconomic and ethnic discrimination, and the redistribution of federal and state spending that increasingly favors the criminalization (instead of the education) of poor men of color. Critical education scholars (e.g., Darder, 2002; 2011; Darder, Torres, & Guiterres, 1995; Fine, 1991; Fine & Burns, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; 2005) have increased our understanding of how social, cultural, political, and economic ideologies intersect to produce a system that oppresses some populations while privileging others. However, the voices of these scholars remain at the margins of educational discourses. Thus, additional critical scholarship (and action) is needed.

Also missing is an adequate body of work that moves away from deficiency-based understandings (including superficial generalizations and harmful stereotypes) of the experiences of low-income Latino males. For example, we are limited in our understanding of Latino men who succeed academically despite the massive odds against them. How did they do it, and what sources of support were most helpful to them in their educational journeys? In what ways were their parents a source of encouragement and motivation? What can be learned from these students about micro-level interventions that complement macro-level efforts in increasing educational equity among all students? With an increased understanding of the answers to these questions, the “achievement gap war” can be fought simultaneously on two fronts: One is to demand more and better educational resources for poor bicultural students, and the other is to help these students manage whatever resources are available (Morales & Trotman, 2011). The two efforts are not mutually exclusive.
The Purpose of this Study

The primary focus of this manuscript is the examination of parental influences on the academic success of low-income Latino men. This investigation is part of a larger study in which I conducted individual and group interviews with low-income Latino males in their first year of college at a prestigious 4-year university. Drawing from resilience (Greene, 2002), ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and critical education theories (e.g., Darder, 2002; 2011), the goals of the larger study are to (a) capture the narratives of educationally successful low-income Latino males; a population that is severely underrepresented in the existing educational and psychological literature, (b) understand the contextual influences (e.g., family, school, neighborhoods) on the educational success of low-income Latino males, and (c) contribute to the strengths-based discourse pertaining to low-income students and their families.

This work contributes to the limited research on the academic success of low-income Latino men as few studies have examined positive education outcomes among this population. Furthermore, many of the studies that focus on academically resilient Latinos operationalize academic resilience in terms of success in college or graduate school. We know less about the influences that promote high school graduation (an achievement that over one third of Latino males do not attain) and subsequent enrollment at four-year institutions (an outcome that only half of college-going Latinos achieve).

An additional contribution specific to this manuscript is the focus on the influential role of parents. Specifically, this investigation seeks to contribute to the growing, but limited, scholarship that represents low-income parents as sources of strength, encouragement, and support for their academically resilient children. In doing so, the goal is not to indirectly blame
the parents of students who have not succeeding in their schooling. Rather, the goal of this work is to understand the ways that low-income Latino parents propel, rather than hinder, academic success among their children. An increased understanding of “what works” in the family environments students are embedded in is important to better inform strength-based education efforts that are grounded in the students’ ecological contexts.
CHAPTER 2: METHOD

This section describes the broader study from which data presented in this manuscript were gathered. The broader study examined multiple sources of influence on academic resilience – familial, school, neighborhood, and personal characteristics. This focus of this manuscript is on the parental influences.

Population of Interest

Latino males were recruited at a large, public, and prestigious university in the Midwest. In the 2010-2011 academic year, the undergraduate student body consisted of 31,252 students, approximately 7% (2,144) of whom identified as Latino/a. The freshmen student body consisted of 6,936 students, 516 (7%) of which identified as Latino/a. Among Latino/a freshmen students, 250 were female and 266 were males. Among Latino male freshmen, approximately half (132) received need-based grants/scholarships (excluding loans) during the 2010-2011 academic year. Hence, low-income Latino males in their first year of undergraduate studies at the University, represented approximately 0.4% of the total undergraduate student population, 2% of the total freshmen population, 26% of the total Latino/a freshmen, and 50% of the Latino male freshmen population during the 2010-2011 academic year. It is important to note that family income and composition are the primary indicators used to determine eligibility for need-based financial aid. However, a family’s purchasing power and standard of living also significantly depend on the cost of living of the city in which they reside (Gilbert, 2002). Therefore, the financial aid needs of students who reside in areas with high cost of living (e.g., New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles) – like the participants in this study – are likely to be underestimated.
Selection Criteria

Participants were recruited based on the following criteria: (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) both parents are of Latino descent, (c) enrolled as a first-year college student at the university in the fall 2010 semester; (d) belong to the first generation to attend college in the United States; and (e) identify as a low-income student (i.e., recipient of need-based college financing). These criteria were selected to target a homogeneous group of Latino males whose social and economic backgrounds placed them at a severe educational disadvantage (Darder et al., 1996; Gándara & Contreras, 2009), yet were able to graduate high school and go on to be selected at a top-tier institution. Participants were recruited through (1) the identification and solicitation of key gatekeepers (e.g., directors, professors, and group leaders who serve the Latino campus community) who in turn identified potential participants; (2) fliers posted throughout campus and sent by email to Latino-oriented organizations, such as student clubs and Latina/o Greek groups; and (3) snowball sampling, which is the process of identifying prospective interview participants who then identify other participants for the study (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

Eleven Latino males in their first year of college (18 to 19 years of age) participated in the study. Ten participants identified as Mexican or Mexican-American; one participant identified as Peruvian. All but one participant were born in the United States. With the exception of one mother who was born in the U.S., all of the participants’ parents were born in Mexico (19 parents) or Peru (2 parents). Ten participants lived most of their childhood and adolescent years in low-income, high crime neighborhoods within a large, urban city in the Midwest; one participant grew up in a middle-class suburb of the city. However, all participants identified as
low-income and reported growing up in homes with high economic insecurity or poverty. Ten participants grew up in two-parent households; one in a single-mother household. Ten (out of 10) fathers and 6 (out of 11) mothers worked outside the home during the participants’ high school years. Family size ranged from 4 to 7. With regards to the effectiveness of the high schools participants graduated from: 5 participants graduated from selective high schools with graduation rates around 90% and above; 4 participants from selective schools with graduation rates between 70% and 90%, and 2 participants from non-selective high schools with a rates less than 70%. Refer to Table 1 & Table 2 for a detailed summary of participants’ background information.

Research Team

In keeping with the standard of reflexivity in constructivist research (Morrow, 2005), we provide a brief description of the research team. The research team consisted of 9 individuals (the primary investigator, 1 master’s-level male research assistant, 1 male doctoral student in educational policy studies, and 5 female undergraduate students in psychology). Eight of the research team members are Latina/o and bilingual in English and Spanish (1 undergraduate student is Asian-American and did not speak Spanish). Six members of the research team identify as coming from low-income backgrounds, 7 members identified as first-generation college students (neither parent attended college in the U.S.), and 7 members identify as immigrants or second-generation immigrants (first-generation to be born in the U.S.).

The characteristics of the research team (described above) are valuable assets in this study because they facilitated understanding of the participants’ experiences. For example, the principal investigator drew from her personal experiences (as a first-generation college student from a working class, immigrant background) to ask follow-up questions and provide examples
of life scenarios that helped facilitate dialogue during the individual and group interviews. Similarly, other members of the research team drew from their own personal experiences in extrapolating meaning from the data and offering alternative interpretations. At the same time, researchers’ personal views can also influence a study in potentially negative ways. Therefore, it is important to incorporate multiple diverse perspectives throughout the research process (as prescribed in the Consensual Qualitative Research approach described below).

**Sources of Data**

The methods for this project consisted of four descriptive questionnaires (completed at the start of the study), three in-depth personal interviews with each participant, and two focus groups (comprising of 5 - 6 participants each; conducted after all personal interviews were completed). These diverse sources of data were employed to minimize method bias and to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences (Morrow, 2005).

**Questionnaires**

Participants were asked to complete four questionnaires that were used to describe the sample and generate additional interview questions. (1) The *Demographics Questionnaires* included questions pertaining to current educational status, ethnic/racial background, socioeconomic status, family characteristics, name/location of schools attended, and name/location of neighborhoods resided in during the pre-college years. (2) The *Neighborhood Risk Questionnaire* (Supple et al., 2006) consisted of 15 items used to assess participants’ perceptions of risk (e.g., low education, poverty, unemployment, substance use, illegal acts, and violence) in the neighborhoods they resided during their adolescent years. (3) An adapted version of the *Multicultural Events Scale for Adolescents* (MESA; Gonzales, Gunnoe, Jackson, &
Samaniego, 2001) was used to assess life stressors that urban youth of color are likely to experience during their adolescent years (e.g., family trouble, peer conflict, school hassles, economic stress, language and cultural conflicts, and violence). (4) The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP; Search Institute, 2004) measures developmental assets of positive adolescent development and gives quantitative scores for each of eight categories. The responses to the questionnaires were used to develop specific questions to guide the individual interviews.

In-Depth Interviews

Three individual interviews were conducted with each participant (see Seidman, 1998) in order to get an in-depth understanding of the family influences that facilitated participants’ academic persistence. The multiple interview design is useful in that: (a) it allows new themes to emerge that assist with achieving a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon, (b) it allows the researcher to become better acquainted with the participants in order to understand what they mean, (c) it helps create a trusting relationship in which participants are likely to talk freely, and (d) it allows data analysis in between interviews to identify areas that need more attention and probing that could subsequently be brought back to the participants for clarification and better understanding.

A total of 33 individual interviews (11 participants, 3 interviews each) were conducted by the principal investigator in a private office in the Department of Psychology, and were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interviews ranged in length from 51 to 118 minutes, with an average of 70 minutes per interview. To encourage participation in all three interviews, participants were compensated in the following manner: $15 for the first interview, $25 for the second, and $35 for the third, for a total of $75.
Protocols for each interview were created by adapting questions from the protocol used by Patricia Gándara (1995), by consulting with professors and academic professionals from diverse fields, and by conducting pilot interviews with Latino male college undergraduate and graduate students. The goal of the first interview was to develop rapport and get a broad overview of participants’ educational experiences, including key challenges faced (e.g. “describe a significant stressful event that nearly jeopardized your education”) and influences that promoted their educational persistence (e.g. “tell me about specific individuals who helped you stay in school”). The goal of the second interview was to elicit more specific details of their own experiences, including the role of family, peers, school staff, community resources, and personal attributes in their journey to college. During the third interview, participants were encouraged to reflect on the meaning of the stories they shared. That is, the third interview focused on how the participants “make sense” of their educational journeys to date, the challenges they faced, the influences that promoted their success, the structural inequities that prevent others from similar socioeconomic backgrounds to succeed (e.g. “why do you think some of your high school friends did not graduate or pursue college?”), and their lived realities in relation to other students from varied gender, class, and ethnic/racial backgrounds (e.g. “What makes your educational experiences different/similar from other students?”). Transition and ending questions were developed to aid in moving from one topic to another and to bring closure to the interviews.

It is important to mention that while specific protocols were created for each interview, the facilitator incorporated a flexible approach in conducting the interviews. That is, the facilitator approached each interview with the goal of creating an atmosphere where the discussion of the topics in the protocol occurred organically; for example, by memorizing the
protocol rather than reading from it, and by not adhering to any specific order in which the questions/probes were introduced. This was done to create a natural dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee and maximize the level of comfort for the participant (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 1998). It was also important in this study to allow space for discussion of relevant topics introduced by the participant that were not in the protocol. As a consequence of this flexibility, the style of the interviews across participants differed widely, even though all topics in the protocols were discussed. For example, some topics that were “supposed to be” discussed during the second interview were discussed in the first interview with some participants and in the third interview with others. Similarly, there were some topics that were discussed in detail with some participants and minimally with others. This flexibility in data collection is consistent with a constructivist approach to qualitative research. Specifically, the view that knowledge is generated through interaction between individuals (rather than the objective measurement of a phenomenon) leads to an emphasis on creating conditions that maximize the authenticity of the information shared between researchers and participants (Ponterotto, 2005).

Focus Groups

Participants participated in one of two focus groups. The goal of the focus groups was to allow participants to provide feedback on preliminary data analysis (i.e. member checking; Morrow, 2005), and to discuss their experiences in a group. Focus groups were utilized in this study because they have been found to be an effective and efficient means of identifying central themes about a relatively unexplored phenomenon (Krueger & Casey, 2000), such as the academic success of low-income Latino males. In addition, the interaction of focus group
participants offers attendees a forum to build on each other’s thoughts and ideas, thus allowing the social group interactions to facilitate the development of meaning (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus groups can also be viewed as dialogical spaces that allow marginalized individuals to meet, speak out, and find their own individual and collective voices, which may be particularly empowering (Umaña-Taylor & Bamaca, 2004).

Five participants participated in one focus group and six in a second group. Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend between 5 and 12 participants for effective focus group discussion. Each focus group was conducted by a Latina facilitator (principal investigator) and a Latino co-facilitator (graduate student in Educational Policy Studies), both of whom are bilingual in English and Spanish, and identify as first-generation college students from low-income, immigrant backgrounds. The facilitator led the discussion and the co-facilitator assisted in probing for discussion and observed nonverbal behaviors and group dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Both facilitators received training (e.g., mock focus groups, reading guides, 60 minute behavioral rehearsal) in conducting focus groups prior to data collection. The focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted approximately two hours each. Participants were compensated with $25 for their participation in the focus group. Food and refreshments were also provided before the start of the focus groups, which allowed researchers to interact informally with participants and build rapport before the formal discussions took place (see Umaña-Taylor & Bamaca, 2004).
Data Analyses

Consensual Qualitative Research

This investigation followed modified guidelines of consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess & Ladany, 2005). The essential components of CQR, as prescribed by Hill and colleagues (2005), are (a) the collection of consistent data across individuals and an in-depth examination of individual experiences; (b) analytic procedures that cultivate diverse perspectives in making sense of the data; (c) systematic discussions among team members to reach consensus in data interpretation; (d) at least one auditor to check the work of the primary research team and minimize the effects of group think; and (e) a three-stage process of data analysis that involves domains, core ideas, and cross-analyses.

In regards to a philosophical stance (see Ponterotto, 2005), CQR draws from other constructivist qualitative approaches (i.e., phenomenological and grounded theory) in its emphasis that knowledge and meaning are produced through interactions between people (i.e., they are co-constructed), that multiple and equal social realities exists, and that realities cannot be directly observed but rather interpreted (Hill et al., 2005). To a lesser extent, CQR also draws from post-positivist approaches to research in its emphasis on objectivity in data analysis (e.g., consensus among team members to summarize the participants’ words and remain close to the data), objectivity in the dissemination of the results (e.g., writing in the third person), and generalization to some degree onto the population of interest. Thus, CQR is ideal when the goal of the research is to gain in-depth and generalizable knowledge about an occurring phenomenon while balancing researchers’ biases and subjectivities.
Data Management

The audio-recordings of the individual interviews and the focus groups were transcribed verbatim by four undergraduate research assistants using the ExpressScribe transcription software. The transcripts of all interviews were checked for accuracy by another member of the research team. A word processor program was used for data organization.

Analytic Procedures

Data analysis in CQR is a three-step process. First, domains (i.e., specific categories used to cluster data) are used to organize interview transcripts. Second, core ideas (i.e., concise summaries) are used to abstract the essence of the data within domains. The final process is cross-analysis, which is used to develop categories that describe common themes across participants. These three stages were incorporated in the study and are described below. Multiple judges and auditors at each step of the process were employed to balance individual and group subjectivities (Hill et al., 2005). All members of the research team were trained in qualitative data analysis by the first author, who has previous experience using the CQR approach (see Cruz-Santiago & Ramírez García, 2011).

Domains: Categorizing the Interviews

Two advanced undergraduate members of the research team extracted domains from each transcript to conceptually organize the data generated from interviews. The primary coding task at this stage was to organize the 3 interview transcripts for each participant into categories in one document, and the 2 focus group transcripts into categories in a separate document. The research assistants initially organized the data using categories derived from the interview protocols. Any data that could not be organized under the domains from the interview protocols were
categorized as “other”. This process yielded 12 separate documents of domains; one for each participant and one for the focus groups. Each document was reviewed by the first author to check for accuracy and offer feedback on the initial coding, including suggesting domains to organize data categorized as “other”. Next, the assistants presented their preliminary analysis to the rest of the research team who acted as auditors in order to reach consensus of the emerging categories.

**Core Ideas: Editing the Individual Summaries**

The next step involved extracting the core ideas from each participant’s categorized summary. Hill and colleagues (2005) conceptualize this stage of data analysis as an editing process in which the participant’s verbatim responses are reduced to statements that are “concise, clear, and comparable across cases” (p.200). The essential task at this stage is to remain as close to the data as possible and retain the participant’s explicit meaning, without assumptions or interpretations by the researchers. What follows is an example of a transcribed statement transformed to a core idea.

*Um like, my dad was not...he did not really like have time to talk to my teacher and stuff. But he worked really hard, like 12 hours a day and he would always tell me to focus on school so that I can have a better life. So yeah, he showed me that he valued education.* – Transcribed Statement

*The participant’s father worked long hours and did not attend school-related events. Nevertheless, he used his circumstances to show his son that education can be a gateway for better opportunities.* – Core Idea

Four undergraduate research members – including the two original coders of the domains – worked in groups of two to extract the core ideas from each summary. The core ideas were presented to the first author for feedback and then to the entire research team.
research meetings, the team compared the core ideas for each participant to the original statements to ensure accuracy and clearness.

**Cross-Analysis across Participants and Methods**

The next steps involved cross-analysis to develop themes across participants. The results were presented to the auditors for discussion and consensus. The final themes across the 11 participants and in the 2 focus groups were then combined and presented to the principal investigator who served as an additional auditor and helped finalize the combined results of the study. For the purposes of this paper, we limit our discussion to the domains, core ideas, and themes that pertain to parental influences on the academic persistence of the participants.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the standards that should be met in order to ensure quality and accuracy of research findings (Morrow, 2005). In this study, several steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the data. First, in addition to minimizing method bias, the multiple qualitative method design of the study allowed the principal investigator to interact with the participants individually and in a group over a period of time. This helped increase the trust and comfort of the participants, and hence their willingness to be more open with the interviewer (e.g. one participant shared something very personal – reportedly not previously shared with anyone else – during the 3rd interview).

Second, we utilized written and audio-recorded process notes to help make sense of the data. Process notes are documented observations, reactions, and reflections of investigators throughout the research process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The audio-recorded process notes were taken immediately following each individual interview (monologue by the
interviewer) and each focus group (conversation between the interviewer and co-facilitator).

Written process notes were taken by members of the research team during research meetings and while completing tasks pertaining to data analysis (e.g. transcription, coding, etc). This is done to monitor reactions associated with data collection and data analysis, document how and why decisions/changes are made, and keep track of our individual and collective subjectivities in making sense of the data (Emerson et al., 1995).

Lastly, we increased the trustworthiness of the data by incorporating member checking strategies. The three-interview design allowed for informal member checking at the second and third interviews, when participants had an opportunity to explain or change their responses and provide additional information on the emerging themes from the previous interview(s). Member checking also occurred during the focus group discussions, where preliminary data analyses were presented to the participants. We also asked participants to play an active role in the data analysis process by soliciting their feedback on the narrative summary of their own interviews, and on the summary of the findings across participants. Together, these various strategies increased the trustworthiness of the data by establishing rapport with the participants, documenting researchers’ reactions during the research process, and incorporating ongoing member checking strategies which encouraged participants to play an active role in the research process.
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

This study is part of a larger project that examines the family, school, and neighborhood influences on the academic achievement among low-income Latino men. The results presented below pertain primarily to the parent influences that participants identified: (1) Parents’ expressed commitment to their children’s education; (2) Parents as role models and sources of motivation; and (3) Interdependent family relationships. Tables 3, 4, & 5 display the categories under each theme, the participants that endorsed these categories, and sample quotes. Appendix A includes the case narratives of each participant. The quotes below were minimally edited for clarity, with the goal of reflecting meaning rather than providing a verbatim statement. Pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript to protect the participants’ identities.

Theme 1: Parents’ Expressed Commitment to their Children’s Education

All participants shared that their parents valued education and that their parents were actively involved in helping them succeed academically. Some participants described traditional ways in which their parents (primarily mothers) were involved, such as volunteering or attaining employment at the schools, consistent communication with school staff, and helping with school assignments. This type of involvement was more prevalent during the years of the participants’ primary schooling. Other participants shared that their parents’ limited proficiency in English restricted their involvement with the school and ability to help with assignments. These participants emphasized other ways in which their mothers and fathers actively promoted and supported their children’s educational success, such as regularly communicating the value of education, using their resources to support educational activities, and actively monitoring participants’ academic progress and goals. These strategies are described further below.
Parents’ Intentional Efforts in Communicating the Value of Education

*Using Themselves as Negative Case Examples*

Perhaps one of the most prevalent narratives in this study is that of parents using their own hardships as an illustration of the kind of life that awaits participants without an education. For example, Pedro reported that as early as five years of age, he can remember his father trying to instill in him the value of education by taking him to the factory where he worked:

*He used to take me to work a lot and he used to tell me things like, ‘you don't have to do this, you can do anything you want to do when you have an education.’ And he said it repeatedly to make sure that I got it. I was like 5 when he started doing this, but like it still sticks with me.*

Joseph shared a similar story in describing how his father used the misfortunes in his life to motivate Joseph to succeed in his studies and pursue a college education:

*My father always said things like “do well in school because you don’t want to have to work like I work, in the lowest possible place. You don’t have to work with your hands, you want to work with your mind, you want to make good money so that you don’t have to scratch and claw for every little cent that you have…trying to make it.” So you know, that’s what I want...cause I have an opportunity to have a better life if I focus on school.*

For some participants, the examples of what not to do were illustrated by their parents’ illegal activities. One participant, Pedro, shared that his father used to sell drugs from their home to supplement his income in construction, and that he was arrested 5 times for DUls. These negative circumstances had a profound impact on Pedro:

*It was like, I saw my dad in and out of jail, in and out of work, and all this other stuff and I was just like I don’t want to be that. And for about two years of my life I strictly thought ‘everything that I'm gonna do it's going to be the opposite thing my dad would do.’*
However, even Pedro (in reflecting on his father’s influence on his education) shared that he has high regard for his father and discussed his father’s unfavorable story as one of redemption and personal growth:

Up until now I’ve never really thought about what I think about him…like he’s done some messed up things, like the second time he went to jail he went for a year and we became so poor that we would go without food some days. ... Um, but anyways, I'm glad everything happened the way it did....he is really smart and a good man who was just lost for a while, but he’s back on track...like we have this unspoken bond...we know we love each other. He always tells me that he’s proud of me for doing so well in school and not following his ways.

Explicitly Linking Education with Economic Mobility

It is clear from the participants’ narratives that parents made an explicit connection between school success and upward economic mobility, and that they emphasized this link when discussing the value of education with their children. For example, Adrian shared the following:

My parents’ attitude about college was this: If elementary and high schools are given, so is college. They always told me that I had to graduate from college if I wanted a career that makes me money and makes me happy. So that’s why I’m here, to get smarter and have a better future.

Similarly, James reported the strong influence those early conversations about the importance of education had on him:

My parents’ small pep talks when I was little stuck to me...They always said things like ‘you have to do good in school so you can go to college and get prepared for a good career.’ So I always had that in mind, you know. I want to have a job that actually pays me a salary I can live on.

Perhaps not surprising given the socioeconomic background of the participants, the importance of learning for learning’s sake was not a common narrative in this study. While all participants shared that their parents encouraged them to pursue any area of interest in college, it is clear that the parents’ message about the importance of education in achieving economic well-
being influenced their children. For example, when asked about their intended major in college, all participants focused the discussion on the job opportunities and typical salaries in said specialization. Additionally, virtually every participant had difficulties articulating the value of education irrespective of employment opportunities and other economic indicators. The one exception was Luke who learned from his father that education is a tool to explore and better understand the world we inhabit, not just means to achieve economic success:

*My dad reads a lot, he goes through books like crazy and they’re pretty big books! Even to this day, he’s always recommending books for us to read….He didn’t go to college, but he knows a lot of stuff from the books he reads and the years that he spent in the army… I remember him saying stuff like “I don’t want you to feel like this is the only world that’s out there.” And when we were little he would take us to a lot of museums and fairs in other states, bookstores, and like all these different places. I appreciated that a lot because it opened me up to so many different things and it made me want to learn more about other things to explore.*

**Parents’ Monitoring of Academic Progress and Goals**

All participants shared that their parents were actively involved in monitoring their academic progress to ensure that their children were doing well in school. Moreover, the participants identified a diverse range of parenting practices that were effective in keeping them “on track” in school.

**Physical Presence at the Elementary School**

While not a common narrative among this sample, a few participants shared that their parents became directly involved in their elementary school – by volunteering, attaining a job at the school, joining school boards, and/ or establishing personal relationships school staff. As James illustrates, this kind of involvement motivated participants to do well in school:
Everybody knew me because of my mom. She was always involved with the school, especially with my brother because he has always been in special education...She always fought for our education and any problems that we had, she always went to the school. The principal actually knew her name and they shared a tight bond. It was pretty cool...Now that I realize it, her being involved, it was like another reinforcement that helped me learn. I was always on my work, on my studies, on my homework because I knew she had eyes everywhere in the school. Yeah, she was doing other things like working and taking care of the house, but she was still connected to the school... this was a big impact because it put me where I'm at today.

Most participants, however, shared that their parents rarely visited their schools due to language issues and/or feelings of discomfort and disrespect. Rather, these participants shared that their parents were involved in other ways that made a difference in their early education.

Helping with School Work

One way that parents were involved in their sons’ learning (during grade school) was by helping them with their homework and/or engaging in learning activities that supplemented the material being learned in school (e.g., reading, teaching the multiplication table, etc.). The participants shared that, although this was not something they always appreciated at the time, their parents’ (mostly mother’s) help was beneficial for them. For example, Adrian shared the following about his mother’s resolve in ensuring that he always completed his homework correctly and on time:

My mom would always be telling me to do my homework, even when I didn’t have any [laughs]. She would always put a lot of pressure on me so that my homework would be perfect...she would sit there and help me out if she knew stuff. It was annoying sometimes, but I know that it helped because I got straight A’s all the way up to 6th grade. After that, she couldn’t help me with homework because she didn’t understand but she kept asking me to explain to her what I was doing....she was always on me like that.

Similarly, Cesar – who is currently studying to be an engineer – shared that his mother would give him math problems to work on so that he could develop his math skills:
In elementary school grades didn’t matter, or at least nothing to really stress about. But my mom would always give me extra math problems. She was always testing me on the [multiplication] tables and stuff like that. So that became I guess my forte and now I'm like studying to be an engineer.

Providing Incentives to do Well Academically

Participants also discussed the various ways that their parents rewarded and/or punished them to promote favorable grades and behaviors at school. As Joseph illustrates, the participants understood that these reinforcement practices were not random and were explicitly tied to their schooling outcomes:

My parents were always on me about school and they made it a priority for my life. They always pushed me to do my best. Like if I was slacking and they knew I wasn’t reaching my full potential, they would ground me or take something away until they saw improvement in my next report card. Then they would explain that, “this is what happens when you’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing.” ...And they would also give me money or buy me games when I got A’s and B’s...It’s funny, now that I think about it, they were always doing things to steer me in the right direction [laughs].

Some participants shared that they were motivated not by the rewards or punishment that they may receive, but simply by their desire to please their parents. For example, Danny shared that his father always wanted him to do better and not to settle for mediocre grades: “Even when I got a B, he would be like ‘that’s good, but why didn’t you get an A?’ So you know, I always studied to get an A.” He goes on to describe an instance in which he was disappointed in himself for disappointing his parents:

I got in trouble at school for making fun of a kid or something. My parents found out about it and I was scared. They didn’t punish me or anything, but they told me that they were not happy with me fooling around instead of focusing on school. That’s a story I remember because I felt really bad that I like disappointed them.
Balance between Youth Autonomy and Parental Guidance during the High School Years

In comparison to their elementary schooling years, all participants shared that they had more autonomy in their schooling during their high school years since their parents were less actively involved in monitoring their school work and communicating with teachers. Nevertheless, participants expressed that their parents continued to play an active role in supporting their educational goals. Specifically, parents regularly inquired about the participants’ school life and provided guidance when participants needed to make important academic decisions. For example, Joseph shared that although his parents were limited in their English and knowledge of the U.S. school system, they pushed him to do the necessary research for high schools in order to find a good alternative to his neighborhood school: “They would ask me about the specific schools and what made them good and encouraged me to pick the best ones. They told me not to worry about the distance because they would pay for my transportation.” Danny also shared that he regularly communicated with his parents about what was going on for him in high school and regularly asked for their guidance:

They were always encouraging and motivating, always asking me questions about school, classes, etc. Ya know, always staying up to date to how I'm doing and giving me feedback. I'll tell them I'm having trouble in some class and they'll tell me to not be afraid, to ask for help. They always helped me find the solution to a problem.

The parents’ active interest in participants’ academic progress and goals also allowed parents plenty of opportunities to encourage and motivate participants to use their free time in positive and productive ways. For example, Lito – who received scholarships and awards as a result of his involvement in a variety of clubs and programs throughout high school – shared that his mother was the main reason why he pursued these extracurricular activities:
My mother didn’t visit the school a lot, but she always told me to put academics first and then have fun. Like when I started high school, she saw me playing video games and doing random stuff on the computer...so she told me to get more involved in school clubs and activities. Her words were like ingrained in me and I think that’s why I always kept looking out for opportunities and things to do in school.

Oliver also shared how his father influenced his decision to get involved, particularly in sports:

I was in so many programs because my dad was always telling us to like not waste our time watching TV...I think that this kept us off the streets and around the right people that had similar goals about going to college.

Parent’s Use of their Limited Resources

Monetary

Many participants described how their parents used the limited resources they had to help their children achieve their educational goals. Perhaps the most striking narratives in this regard are those of participants whose financially-struggling parents willingly paid for participants’ educational expenses and enrichment activities. For example, Lito (whose mother encouraged him to get involved in extracurricular activities and who is now majoring in international finance) shared the critical sacrifice that his parents made so that he can take advantage of a school-based opportunity in high school to travel to Europe:

They gave me $7,000 to go to France because it would look good on my resume and they want me to succeed in life...They don’t even see it as a sacrifice, but I know it was their entire savings for the 20 years that they have been married.

Additionally, some participants attended private primary or secondary schools. Luke, who attended a faith-based boarding high school with his twin brother, describes why he thinks his parents were willing to make the sacrifices necessary to pay – albeit, a small percentage of the tuition – for that type of education:
I just think they wanted us to have a better life than they had...they wanted us to get away from the neighborhood and not be around that because they felt like we deserved better and they would always sacrifice so much for us growing up, especially my mom. She would really work hard and give up buying things for herself to make sure that we had everything that we needed, especially in high school because there was a big gap between the rich kids and kids like us who didn’t have money. Mom would try hard to fill in the gap for us.

Other participants shared similar stories of their parents making financial sacrifices to help participants with educational expenses, including lap tops, money for transportation, and money for school-sponsored trips and other activities. As the following quote by Oliver illustrates, one can imagine that there were also times when the participants were unaware of the sacrifices parents made to support their education: Pa is the type of guy that even if he doesn’t have the money, he will never let us know. Like he’d just pay for whatever we needed.

Even when participants were aware of their parents’ financial struggles and wanted to help by seeking employment themselves, many of the parents did not allow it. For example, Joseph shared the following:

My parents didn’t allow me to get a job. They were like, you know what, don’t worry about money, we’ll take care of that part. You take care of what you have to do and focus on school...They were afraid that if I started making money, I would just, you know, graduate from high school and get a job. And that’s something they didn't want for me, so I didn’t have a job until my senior year. So, you know, I appreciated that because I realize now that I would not be able to have done a good job with all the homework and stuff.

Interestingly, although most participants come from families living below the poverty line and in a city with a high cost of living, the need-based grants and scholarships that they received did not fully cover their college expenses. As a result, their parents were paying the rest with loans and/or personal savings. This is remarkable considering the chronic economic hardships many parents faced, and that many were also providing economic support for family
members in their home country. It is also important to note most participants had the option of attending colleges/universities in their city, thereby reducing college expenses. However, they did not take this option because of the prestige of the university they attend and the seemingly better opportunities it offers. Hence, the parents’ financial support of the participants’ decision is another indication of the tremendous sacrifice that Latino parents willingly make for the education of their children. In sum, throughout their academic journey, the strong message that most participants received from their parents was this: if it has to do with education, we’ll find a way to pay for it.

**Time**

In addition to financial support, participants also expressed gratitude for their parents’ time commitment and their willingness to accompany participants to/from school activities (e.g., school fairs, sports practice, after-school meetings). For example, Oliver shared that his parents coordinated their schedules in a way that allowed them to be available to give their children rides to/from school and other activities, and thus limit their children’s exposure to the violence in the neighborhood:

*I had to be in so many meetings, but like Pa would basically give me a ride wherever I needed to go. Even when I asked him to let me take the train, he’d drop me off at the train station and pick me up so that I didn’t walk around anywhere... So [I think what helps] is just basically like the support parents give you. It doesn’t necessary mean they have to go to school and talk to your teachers to see how you’re doing and what not. They show that they care in different ways – giving me a ride, spending time, letting me join like all these sports and groups, telling me to look for scholarships, never pressured me to have a job. I think stuff like that helps a lot.*
Social Networks

Another parental resource that some participants benefited from was their parents’ social networks. Namely, participants reported that their parents actively sought information from family and friends pertaining to their children’s education, including information about educational services available, quality of high schools, and funding options. This information proved to be beneficial for some participants who, as a result, applied and were admitted to high quality secondary schools and/or programs. Lito’s story of why he attended a competitive college prep high school illustrates the role that parents’ social networks play:

*My mother doesn’t know English so she didn’t really attend school meetings and stuff, but she was very involved in my education and she always did what she could to stay informed and push me... [For example], she never wanted me to go to my neighborhood high school because it was really bad and it was always on the news for shootings and fights...she found out from her friend about the high schools that students have to take a test for...I think her friend had two sons at [competitive high school], so my mom was getting all this information from her and talking to me about it. She like pushed me to take the test and go to that school because she wanted me to be safe and get a good education.*

Overall, whether parents used their own hardships as examples, set clear expectations, or used their limited resources to promote educational outcomes, all participants in this study viewed their parents as playing an active and beneficial role in their educational pursuits. Furthermore, participants benefited the most when parents communicated their value for education with their words and with their actions.

Theme 2: Parents as Role Models and Sources of Motivation

A second theme that emerged from this study pertains to the positive influence parents’ past and present experiences had on participants’ resolve to succeed academically. The majority of the participants proudly discussed their parents’ stories of hard work, sacrifice, and
educational persistence. In the paragraphs that follow, we expand on these stories and their reported impact on the participants’ academic success.

Parents’ Examples of Hard Work and Sacrifice

*Stories of Challenges Faced in the Past*

All of the participants shared stories about the hardships that their parents faced and their resilience in enduring and (at times) overcoming such hardships. Some participants shared specific examples of their parents’ childhood struggles living in their home country. Others shared examples of the hardships their parents endured in the process of immigrating to the U.S. and making a living for themselves. While the intent of the parents in sharing these oral histories cannot be known from this study, it is clear that the participants were inspired by their parents’ fortitude. For example, Pedro shared that he was encouraged by his father’s immigration narrative:

> My dad would tell us his story about how he crossed the river and about how he was homeless for a few months. How he doesn’t want us to go through stuff like that...He always stressed that we could do anything we wanted to do. That we could have a better life if we focused on school...He is a very motivational person.

*Observations of Parents’ Daily Challenges*

While participants learned about their parents’ past struggles through the stories shared by their parents, they were aware of the present hardships through their own observations as spectators of their parents’ daily lives. That is, participants regularly witnessed the life stressors that their parents faced as a result of their marginalized position in society. The participants shared that they were proud of the parents’ work ethic and strength in enduring these challenges, and for doing whatever it takes to provide an acceptable standard of living for their family. For example, James shared the following about his hardworking father:
We live in the city so my dad makes the trip every day to work which is about a 1 hour drive...His job is not the best, but he keeps the bills paid, he keeps the roof over my head, food in the fridge and on the table, keeps us warm in the winter and cool in the summer... He’s always worked. That’s something that is honorable. Even though he didn't get a higher education, he still stuck to working...he’s not scared of hard work.

Lito, who previously reported that his father was not as involved in his education as his mother, also shared that his father works hard and long hours to provide his family a decent standard of living:

My father works a lot to support the family and he takes whatever overtime he can get because obviously he needs the money and he wanted to, you know, have us live a normal life... like not sweating during the summer because of no air conditioning, or losing sleep worrying about living on the streets or not having anything to eat...He wanted to lead a decent life so we wouldn’t suffer that much,

Parents’ Funds of Knowledge

Participants who had the opportunity to observe their parents working (either in formal employment or in the home) shared that they gained a greater appreciation for the valuable knowledge and survival skills that their parents have, even with no formal education. For example, Joseph proudly shared a story about how his father transformed an abandoned house that he purchased cheaply into a beautiful home. Joseph also shared what he learned from witnessing this transformation first-hand:

For like six months, my dad basically had two jobs. He would wake up early in the morning, like 4 and get home around 5pm from his first job. After dinner, he’d go work on the house...If I was done with my homework, he would take me with him so I always made sure that my homework was done cause it was fun working with my dad. I mean, I was a little kid so I didn’t help much, but I still liked going [laughs]....I think [what he wanted to teach me] was how to fend for myself. He was like “oh you know, yeah I’m poor but I don’t need to get a contractor to fix this house. I don’t need a mechanic to fix the car. I’ll buy the parts. I’ll save whatever labor’s left.” I think that’s why we weren’t that bad off. Weren’t that
bad financially because my dad did everything. If he didn’t know how to fix things, we never would have had our own house.

Joseph’s experience working with his father taught him that while formal education is important, there are other equally legitimate forms of knowledge worth learning. For Joseph and other participants, their parents’ resourcefulness and diverse skills set allowed their families to “stretch” their limited income and diminish the effects of living below the poverty line. In fact, many of the participants shared that they never felt poor. For example, Oliver shared the following:

I don’t know it’s kind of weird because I saw our income tax when I was applying for financial aid and it says that we basically don’t make any money… but it’s never felt that way you know? We always had what we needed.

Participants Motivated by Parents’ Resilience

Parents’ persistence in the face of difficult circumstances was an example that many participants wanted to emulate in their academics. That is, participants expressed that their parents’ example motivated them to endure and overcome their own educational challenges. For example, Abraham shared the following about watching his father (a butcher) wake up early to go to work: Seeing him go to work at 4 or 5 in the morning was a big influence for me. I started buckling down and doing the work more to get better grades. Similarly, Luke expressed that a significant motivation for him in excelling in his studies was his desire to make his mother proud of him and to demonstrate that he values the sacrifices she has made:

A big thing why I did well was to make my mom proud. She’s doing all these things for us so I felt like I had to repay her in some way and make her happy. I felt like if we weren’t doing well, it would hurt her cause she's been working so hard. Why add another stress for her?
Interestingly, some participants may have unknowingly learned from their parents to be resourceful and to “make do with what [they] had.” In the same way that a fish is not aware of the water it swims in, the participants may not have been aware of their own struggles and sacrifices because it was a normative part of life for them, their parents, and many of the people they knew. For example, Adrian, a participant who commuted a total of 4 hours/day to attend the selective high school he graduated from, said the following when asked how his parents viewed his sacrifice:

*They both lived pretty hard lives, so like I don’t think they are impressed or like notice [what I did] as a sacrifice. They probably see it as something that I was supposed to be doing...I didn’t even think of it as a big deal until you asked me about it [laughs].*

*Desire to “Pay” Parents Back*

Perhaps the most common motivation for participants doing well in school was the desire to make their parents proud and to show them that their past and current sacrifices are not wasted effort. Moreover, they wanted to do well academically not only to have a better life for themselves, but also to give their parents a better life and “pay them back for all that they have done”. For example, Luke shared the following:

*I feel like I owe them so much cause they've done a lot for me. When I was little, I told my mom that the first paycheck I get will go to her. Before I get a house, I'm gonna get her a house. She's never had her own house or her own garden because we live in an apartment. When I get a career, I want to do that; put my goals aside and give something back to her.*

Carlos, the one participant from a single-parent household, shared similar sentiments about wanting to succeed so that he is able to take care of his mother and “make up” for the hard life she’s lived as a single-parent:
Once I get a job, like one of my main priorities is I want to take care of my mom and make sure she is well off cause she's a really really hard-working woman. Like she's worked at a factory for [many] years. She works the night shift, so she comes home tired. You know, I don't want her to keep having to do that...She’s always helping people out...she deserves to have an easier life.

Similarly, Cesar shared the following about paying his parents back for his college tuition:

My parents already told me that they don’t expect me to pay them back for paying my college tuition. They told me to see it as my inheritance. They don’t want money from me, they just want me not to cast them aside when I'm older, you know, to actually spend time with them...but I at least want to help them raise whatever they spent on my college expenses because I know that's digging into their retirement fund and I don't want them to be working for their whole life.

Parents’ Example of Educational Persistence

Parents who Completed Postsecondary Education in their Home Country

All of the participants in this study were first-generation U.S. college students; that is, neither parent had yet attained a college degree in the United States. However, four parents (out of 21) completed postsecondary education in their home country and had attained professional degrees – Oliver’s mother attained an accountant degree in Mexico, Danny’s mother completed graduate school in psychology in Peru, his father attained a degree in engineering, and Lito’s mother graduated college in Mexico with a degree in communications and worked as both a teacher and a government employee during her time there. Unfortunately, they were not able to transfer those qualifications to the U.S. As a result, most were limited to employment opportunities that were unskilled, unstable, arduous, and low-pay.

Although most of these parents were not able to use their acquired educational and professional experience to advance their own opportunities in the United States, they nonetheless served as role models for their children. Specifically, the participants shared that their parents set high expectations for them and encouraged them to take full advantage of the educational
opportunities available to them in this country. Some participants, like Lito, shared it was easier to apply this advice because their parents modeled for them the importance of pursuing higher education:

*My mom has always backed me up with my studies and I feel that I am motivated because of her. If it wasn’t for her, then I wouldn’t have taken my studies as seriously because my dad did not graduate from elementary school and my mom graduated from college [in Mexico] so she was basically the one that kept me motivated because she wanted me to be like her and not be like my dad.*

Parents who Pursued Education in the U.S.

Four participants shared that their parents pursued or were pursuing education in the United States. Danny, for example shared that his father – who had attained an engineering degree in Peru – did not give up on his education when he came to this country. He attended night school to learn English and eventually attained a teaching certificate. When reflecting on his father’s dedication and the impact that his parents’ resilience has had on him, Danny shared the following:

*He had to do what he had to do, and that’s what I have to do...My parents never told me to be like them, they just told me to always do my best in everything. But I don’t wanna do well just for me but for them too because they’ve been through so much man, and they have been able to accomplish a lot from nothing.*

The participants whose parents pursued education in the United States despite juggling multiple jobs and not being familiar with the language, felt that they had “no excuse” not to excel in their studies. For example, James – whose mother was enrolled as a part-time student at a 4-year college at the time of the interview (and whose father had attained a GED) – shared the following about his mother’s journey and its impact on him:

*Little by little, my mom started working for community centers or different schools and my mom finally got a job where she was running a center herself and she still is! She wasn't going to school when she started but then she got in to...*
School through her organization. I think she got some scholarship or something to help her...She's in school, she's a mom, she's taking care of the house, working, and paying my college tuition. It’s like I have no excuse not to do good in school and keep going [until graduating from college].

Overall, 7 out of 11 participants (or 64% percent) had parents who either had completed some years of postsecondary education in their home country, attained a high school diploma or GED in the United States, or were actively seeking a college degree in this country. The concept that Latino parents can be examples of educational persistence for their children is not a common discourse in the existent literature. On the contrary, Latino parents are at best depicted as well-intentioned individuals who lack the knowledge, resources, and personal educational experiences to help their children succeed academically; and at worst as uneducated individuals who teach their children to value work and financial gains over learning and personal growth. However, the above narratives illustrate that Latino students are inspired by their parents’ educational trajectories, even when the opportunity structures that allow parents to use education to their own vocational advancement is not necessarily available.

Theme 3: Interdependent Family Relationships

A final theme in this study pertains to the relational family dynamics that positively influenced participants. Specifically, we discuss three aspects of family life – family closeness, family interdependence, and family resilience – that participants identified as having a significant impact not only on their academic achievement, but also on their personal character and identity.
Parent-Child Interactions that Promoted Closeness

*Spending Quality Time Together*

The majority of the participants shared that they were close with their parents and enjoyed spending time with them through activities such as sports, board games, projects, outdoor events, church functions, celebrations, and trips, depending on the families’ financial health. For many of the participants, the activities themselves were not as important as the parent-child interactions that occurred as a result of those activities. Lito, for example, shared how much he appreciated the fact that his father took the family to the park on Sundays and spent time with them despite the father’s demanding work schedule. This was one way that his father showed Lito (and the rest of his family) that they are a priority in his life:

*I think that’s something that I admire from him because I know a lot of dads of other friends who just give them 20 dollars a week. And like they don't even care about them. The dads just wanna drink and have fun away from home when they have a day off. And like my dad could be that person too, but he chooses not to because he loves all of us. So yeah, I think he really cares about us and I really admire that about him.*

Similarly, James shared how much he treasured the time he and his father played sports and worked on cars together, and the valuable lessons he learned from their conversations:

*So my dad introduced me to sports, like soccer and basketball when I was in 4th grade. He taught me how to play, trained me. I’m already 18 and he’s 50 years old. He still plays with me. We watch basketball games, and other sports together...We’re also both into cars. I like the engines, and learning how to change things. We kid around, but we also talk about serious stuff. Like he tells me how to treat women and like how to drink responsibly. He’s teaching me like all the things he knows about being a man. He can pass it on to his son, so I can pass it on to mine.*

In this way, spending time together engaging in an activity of mutual interest as a vehicle for deeper conversations, and provided the participants and their parents ample opportunities to get
to know each other better. It also provided parents with opportunities to pass down their values and life lessons to their sons.

**Consistent and Honest Communication**

We discussed previously (under the first theme) the consistent and deliberate conversations that parents had with their sons pertaining to the value of education. It is not surprising, then, to learn that participants had regular conversations with their parents about other topics as well, including religion and morality, manhood, relationships, politics, family issues, future goals and aspirations, etc. As the above quote by James suggests, these conversations took place not as planned events in and of themselves, but as natural dialogues that occurred when participants were spending time with their parents working on projects, playing sports, or simply at the dinner table. Perhaps one of the most important qualities that participants valued and appreciated was the transparency in which they and their parents communicated with them, especially as the participants grew older. For example, Danny shared the following about the manner in which he and his parents communicated:

*I could always turn to my parents if I was confused about something or had a question. They would always be honest and sincere about it. They were blunt and told me how it was instead of giving mixed messages... When it came to decisions affecting the whole household we would discuss each of our opinions and talk about them to get to a decision. Even if I was the youngest I always had a voice... [For example], I always knew what was happening with the foreclosure and dad retiring cause they never tried to hide stuff like that. I was never afraid or panicked. It wasn't a happy moment or sad but it was just like, how do we deal with this now?*

Joseph also shared that he felt comfortable communicating with his parents and witnessing their decision-making processes:
I always talked to my parents about everything... Then, once I got into high school they started including me in their decisions. They thought I was responsible enough to know what was going on around in the house, like what needed to be done or paid for.

Similarly, Cesar shared the following about the trust he has for his parents, particularly his mother:

I feel like a need to tell my parents everything and to be honest with them about stuff because I feel like they trust me so I have to give them reason to trust me. Even if something went bad like I feel the need to tell them about it....Like I don't like to keep too much from them, especially my mom cause we are the closest..

Not all participants expressed that they experienced this level of closeness to their parents. Namely, Carlos shared that because his mother is a single parent and works the night shift in a factory, he did not spend as much time with her as either would have preferred. In addition, Carlos’ limited Spanish proficiency and his mother’s limited English proficiency served as an additional barrier in their communication. When asked who he turned to when he needed to talk to someone, he shared that he mostly kept to himself or talked with his older siblings who provided guidance and support. Although the rest of the participants were proficient in Spanish and expressed sharing a close bond with at least one parent, Carlos’ narrative illustrates that even when such a bond is not feasible, participants can feel encouraged and supported by other members of the family.

**Youth Independence in Relation to Family Interdependence**

**Youth Initiative and Autonomy in Making Academic Decisions**

Virtually all participants described themselves as being independent and self-motivated, especially during their high school years. As discussed earlier (in theme 1), parents were not as hands-on in their involvement when the participants were in high school, primarily due to their
limited knowledge of the U.S. education system and what their children needed to do to prepare for college. As a consequence, participants had great autonomy in their schooling decisions, including what courses to take, programs to join, and extracurricular activities to engage in. Participants also shared that they were self-motivated with regards to preparing themselves for college and the application process. For example, when asked if he felt that he was at a disadvantage due to his parents’ limited ability to provide more direction in his education,

Adrian shared the following:

*One thing that I feel that most Latino students have to learn is how to be independent. And it’s not about being independent as in living alone; it’s just relying on yourself for everything cause you can’t ask your parents, they’re not familiar with [the U.S. education system].*

Luke also shared that he was self-motivated to do well academically. He attributes this motivation to the various ways that his parents communicated the value of education during his primary schooling:

*They never really forced anything on me or even told me to do my homework. It was just self-motivation, like this is what I have to do. I guess that came from the fact that they were showing me all these different things that were out there and not just like this neighborhood that we live in. They motivated me [indirectly] I think.*

Participants shared that their parents were proud of them for being motivated and driven, and encouraged their sons to take initiative in their education and seek the appropriate guidance and support when needed. For example, Abraham shared the following:

*My parents basically said to “do what feels right.” I mean they would listen to me and ask questions, but they never really told me what decision to make...They like the fact that I can look out for myself and I don’t always have to turn to them. When things do get rough, I am still their kid so it’s not like they never help. But I take initiative, look for a summer job, get involved with clubs. You have your parents praising you and I have that in my head to not slack off. It’s kind of a nail biter sometimes.*
Youth Actively Sought their Parents’ Guidance

Interestingly, most participants reported that they regularly consulted with their parents about academic decisions, despite their parents’ limited experience with U.S. education. For example, Joseph shared the following:

*My parents really couldn’t help me much with school stuff after elementary school, but I never took that in a bad way, you know, I thought, oh, well I’ll start doing things for myself... But as much as I say I was independent I would always look to my parents to help me decide things or to see if they were the best way to go... I mean, they basically supported every decision I made, but they always had a say in those decisions because I took their opinions into account...Like pa makes suggestions about careers that I would be good at based on what I’m interested in and what he’s observed, and I take that into account when I think about what I’m going to major in...They always encouraged me and geared me toward the right path.*

Similarly, Lito shared how his parents influenced his decision not to seek employment during high school:

*I wanted to work so that I could have my own money. My parents said that it was up to me if I wanted to get a job, but that I should first think it over because it is hard to balance school and work. Then I started thinking about all the classes and [activities] I was doing and I didn’t really see how I would balance it so I didn’t get a job. So it was my choice in the end, but you know, I listened to their advice too.*

In this way, participants exercised their independence by making academic decisions based on their own knowledge as well as their parents’ understanding and advice. Their independence was not exercised without their parents influence.

Facing Family Hardships Together

Protection from Negative Neighborhood Influences

There are a number of ways in which the families of the participants deviated from the standard characteristics of low-income immigrant families – all but one of the participants were
raised in two-parent households, and 7 out of 11 (or 64%) of the participants had parents who had attained at least a high school diploma or GED. These positive attributes, however, did not completely shield families from facing the hardships of living in economic need. Perhaps one of the most common challenges discussed by the participants is the dangers – gang violence, drugs, sexual violence, assault, and other criminal activities – of the low-income, high-crime neighborhoods most grew up in. Consequently, participants shared that their parents took active steps to limit their sons’ exposure to these neighborhood influences. For example, Oliver– whose parents gave a ride everywhere he needed to go due to safety concerns – shared other ways that his parents protected him:

*I mean my parents tried to buy us everything we wanted. Like if we wanted a playstation or Xbox whatever it takes to keep us home, you know? And we were only allowed to play soccer in the backyard or right in front, never too far away from the house...They don’t want to keep us trapped in the house but at the same time they don’t want us out in the neighborhood. They want us doing positive things so I think that’s the kind of support that helps us like get through and stuff.*

Other participants shared similar examples of the various ways in which their parents limited their exposure to the neighborhood. For example, Luke shared that his parents only allowed him and his brother to play in the backyard, and that they made sure that their sons spent the summers involved in programs. Additionally, Luke believes that a big reason his mom wanted them to go to a boarding school is because she wanted them to get away from gangs and consistent family problems and wanted them to focus on their studies. Similarly, Pedro’s father told him that if he just got accepted to his neighborhood school for high school, then he would make him drop out because it was a bad school. This was what motivated Pedro to apply to selective high schools. Some parents also talked to their sons about the importance of staying away from “street kids”
who were not going to school and were “just wasting their time.” As the following quote by Adrian illustrates, parents told the participants to resist these negative peer influences:

_They were always like “Be true to yourself. Don’t let others influence you or manipulate you. You’re not a puppet. You’re your own person.” And they were pretty strict about me going out. Even if I was just going to hang out with my friends, they wanted to know every single detail, especially my mom. She wouldn’t let me go to my friends’ houses if she didn’t know them. She was really annoying, but I guess it was a good thing because I know some kids whose parents weren’t as strict and they always got caught up in problems._

_Marital Problems_

Another family hardship commonly discussed by the participants pertained to marital problems between their parents. Five participants shared that their parents experienced a marital crisis sometime during the participants’ schooling years. For example, Cesar shared that his father had an extramarital affair during Cesar’s junior year in high school:

_My dad had an affair last year and that kind of brought me down a bit, but I struggled through it and was still able to like continue with school and sports. I kinda hated my dad after I found out and even to this day it’s hard for me to talk to him. Like because of trust...but we’ve moved on and we’re better because of it and I don’t really feel that nervous or sentimental or emotional talking about it._

Oliver described a very vivid memory he has about the time his parents almost divorced due to financial debt:

_I remember that day. My dad brought us all [the four children] into one room and my mom was right there crying. We were small so we couldn’t really do much. And my mom was right there crying and my dad was saying like he was going to kick her out of the house because all this debt she got them into and he just couldn’t do it anymore. And he told us we were going to live with him and she was gonna go live with my aunt. He said he didn’t care anymore what she did, and that we weren’t gonna see her anymore and stuff like that. He saw we were sad and my mom just kept crying. He kept telling us to say bye to my mom but then he stood there for like five minutes just quiet. And then he decided to give her another chance I guess. He was like “I can’t leave my kids without their mom you know? They need their mom in their lives too.” But he made her promise in front of us that she wasn’t going to do that anymore._
Unemployment and Legal Issues

Other family problems that participants discussed were incarceration of a family member, parental unemployment, immigration issues, and addictions. For example, Luke shared the following regarding how his father’s difficulty holding down a job, affected the family:

*My dad had this really good job, a really good job with this Japanese company and he ended up leaving that company because they were moving states and my mom didn’t want to leave her family in Chicago so that was a huge hit for my dad because he really loved this company. That was his life and he was really affected, like depressed and stuff. I think it still affects him even now ...I started seeing more of the problems as far as financially with that and even with him and my mom, they were always fighting. I remember growing up and seeing that a lot and seeing my mom cry. That really hurt when I was little and growing up that was a huge thing.*

Pedro – who reported that he wants a career as possibly an urban planner who works with government agencies to help people in poverty – shared how his father’s addictions and regular imprisonment left the family in severe poverty:

*The second time [dad] went to jail we didn’t have any more savings, we didn’t have any source of income at all. We were just so poor like it was ridiculous how poor we were. I would need two dollars for a field trip and my mom wouldn’t be able to give it to me. We were living off link card. Everything was public aid; our food, our doctors, our dentists everything. The only thing we couldn't pay was bills and we just let that debt accumulate.*

Youth & Family Coping Strategies

There were a number of ways that participants said they and their families dealt with these hardships. Some participants shared that they escaped family problems by focusing on their academics and extracurricular activities. For example, Pedro shared how listening, writing, and producing music provided stability and hope when his father was in and out of jail and during the times that his mother was struggling to literally put food on the table:
Music is a huge way for me to express feelings. Like when you hear music you hear feeling in the music and that's how I can explain it. I don't necessarily have many things that directly say how I'm feeling. But I like the way that I can create something that everybody like will always be there no matter what. Like football that's temporary, like school that's temporary, girlfriends are temporary until I get married or something, and friends are temporary even though there's this one friend that has always stuck by my side. But music is always going to be there for me no matter what...I used to say that music was my best friend.

Abraham, whose older brother continues to struggle with drug addiction, shared that his family tried to keep him away from these troubles by telling him to focus on school. He shared that as the youngest of the family and the first to have a chance of college, his family was very protective of him and often concealed troubling information so that his studies would not be affected. He shared that they continue to do this even now that he is in college, and that he often has to plead with his older siblings to inform him about what is going on in the family.

Abraham’s narrative is similar to that of Luke, who shared that his parents sent him to boarding school to escape not only the disadvantage of the neighborhood but also the marital troubles of his parents.

Other participants, however, were more aware of the problems faced by their families. Rather than avoid or attempt to escape from these troubles, the participants shared that they generally dealt with these hardships by relying on their family, friends, and romantic partners for emotional support. Many also shared how their family’s spiritual faith helped them to overcome these troubles. For example, Cesar attributes his parents’ reconciliation following infidelity to the support they received through their Catholic church. He shared that the church saved his parents’ marriage. When asked about the importance of his spirituality to him, Cesar shared that it is very important. He reported that his Catholic upbringing has provided the moral foundation for him to “do the right things” and not give in to peer pressure. He (and other participants) shared that their
spirituality continues to be an important part of their lives in college, and some expressed that they regularly attend church services in the local community.

Youth’s Contribution to Family Wellness

Whether their families were going through the types of crisis mentioned above, or simply the daily struggles faced by low-income immigrants, it is clear that the majority of the participants grew up in highly interdependent families that relied on and supported each other. Moreover, participants expressed a desire to support their parents and proudly shared the number of ways in which they played an active role in assisting their families (e.g., by providing domestic, financial, and emotional support). For example, many of the participants shared that their mothers turned to them for emotional support when they faced difficulties. Cesar shared that he talks to his mother every day even though he is in college and that he finds himself comforting her often even though he is in college and that he finds himself comforting her often when she is in tears. Additionally, James shared an example of a personal “sacrifice” he made to help out his dad when he was sick. He retells the story proudly:

Junior year, my dad was really sick. He had acid reflux and something wrong with his pancreas. He lost about 20 lbs in a month. During this time I was trying out for the basketball team in high school and found out I made it. I stuck with it for some time but with my dad being sick I decided to quit and help my dad do his coaching job instead. I wanted to be on the basketball team but I knew I had to help my dad out. It was the right thing to do.

Participants also shared that they helped their parents with everyday things such as translations, taking care of siblings, and home projects/chores. For example, Danny shared the following about translating for his parents:

My mom and my dad understand the language and speak a little but they are not fluent. I would be the one that translated for them wherever we went…It didn’t bother me. I felt good because I was helping my parents out. I felt good because I could manage both languages and could fully express their thoughts into English.
James, who expressed an interest in a career in Physical Therapy, shared how he took on some responsibilities to help with his older brother who is mentally and physically challenged:

_He’s my “big, little brother” because I have to act like his big brother. I helped him with his homework, drove him to school or wherever, and just basically helped my parents take care of him. When I was younger, I didn’t really care about him. I was just like "stop bothering me, leave me alone already". But then I started growing up and was more concerned about him – asking him if he ate, if he did his homework, telling him to come inside when it was getting late, all this stuff...I have to put up with his actions. He has a compulsion disorder, so you have to cope with his ways and adjust to him. Most people wouldn't understand him. The only people who do is his family: me, my sister, mom, dad, grandmother._

All participants expressed a strong desire in high school to help their parents financially. As participants grew older and became more aware of their parents’ financial struggles, they felt compelled to contribute to the finances in some way. Some participants did this directly by getting a part time job to pay for their own expenses. Other participants shared that their parents discouraged them from seeking employment. Nevertheless, they made efforts to help their parents by limiting their consumption of “luxuries” (e.g., name-brand clothes, electronics, etc.) and other personal expenses their parents paid for. Thus, it is clear that the majority of the participants in this study took pride in contributing to their family, even when they had to make personal sacrifices to do so.

Together, the narratives pertaining to family functioning convey that most participants grew up in home environments that nurtured strong parent-son relationships, supported youth independence under parental guidance, and provided mechanisms by which participants proudly contributed to the wellness of the family, particularly during times of crisis.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Latino students in the United States face multiple systemic obstacles that limit them in realizing their full potential in the current education system. This is particularly true for low-income Latino males, who— in addition to the socioeconomic and ethnic discrimination faced by all poor bicultural students (Darder, 2002; 2011; Darder et al., 1995; Fine, 1991; Fine & Burns, 2003; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999; 2005) — navigate a context in which their masculinity is criminalized rather than privileged (Alexander, 2010; Hurtado, et al., 2012). Under these conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that Latino men have the highest high school dropout rates and lowest college enrollment and graduation rates of the four major ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census, 2010). However, despite the odds against them, there are many low-income Latino males who successfully navigate the education pipeline. How did they do it, and what sources of support were most helpful to them in their educational journeys? As part of a larger study that examines academic resilience among 11 low-income Latino men, the results described in this manuscript pertain to the parental influences identified by the participants. Specifically, three themes emerged: 1) Parents’ expressed commitment to their children’s education; 2) Parents as role models and sources of motivation; and 3) Interdependent family relationships.

Expressed Commitment to Education

With regards to their parents’ commitment, Latino male college students described three ways in which their parents demonstrated that they cared about their children’s education: regular conversations about the economic value of education; actively monitoring and guiding their children’s academic progress; and using their limited resources to support educational
goals. These findings are consistent with those of other studies with low-income Latino parents and resilient students. For example, researchers have demonstrated the ways in which Latino parents use their low socioeconomic status and limited opportunities (e.g., by taking their children to their arduous, low-pay jobs) to motivate their children to persist and excel in their education (De Gaetano, 2007; Gandara, 1995; Lopez, 2001; Martinez et al., 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002; Zarate, 2007). In this way, parents explicitly connect academic success with economic mobility. We know that most Latino parents emigrate from their home countries in pursuit of the “American Dream” for their children, and that they regularly convey these high hopes for their children’s educational and economic future (Kao, 2004; Raleigh & Kao, 2010). Studies have also shown that students who place a high economic value on education achieve higher academically than those who place a lower value (e.g., Colon & Sanchez, 2009). This may explain why all of the participants in this study discussed their intended career paths in terms of projected salaries and other monetary benefits rather than an intrinsic interest in the subject matter. That is, the participants may have internalized the message conveyed by their parents that the goal of a college education is a high-paying job.

According to LeFevre & Shaw (2011), “formal” parental involvement includes “external activities in which parents are physically present at the school or at a school-related function or in which they initiate contact with the school” (p. 4). In this study, only three participants reported that their parents were involved in this way; the rest reported that their parents were not actively involved in their elementary or secondary schools. Rather, these participants described the ways that their parents supported their schooling at home by monitoring their after-school time and helping with school work (during their elementary school years), and by encouraging
and guiding them (during their high school years). This is consistent with other studies that examine Latino parent involvement through the perspectives of parents (e.g., Auerbach, 2006; 2007; Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011, Orozco, 2008; Ramirez, 2003) and students (e.g., Ceballo 2004; Cavazos et al., 2010; Gandara, 1995, Zalaquett, 2006) and illustrate that the majority of Latino parents support their children’s education through “informal” home-based activities. For example, in a three-year ethnographic study pertaining to parental involvement among working class parents of high-achieving high school students, Auerbach (2007) found that Latino parents tell family stories and give advice about school experiences through cultural narratives called consejos, and that they provide moral and emotional support by talking with their children about future ambitions and the value of education. Other examples of informal support from Latino parents found in the existing literature include: making sure the children arrive at school on time, providing a quiet time and place to do homework, regularly helping with homework, monitoring school attendance, eliminating potential distractions (e.g., employment, house chores, or babysitting younger siblings), and boosting their children’s self-esteem and applauding their progress or hard work (Auerbach, 2006; 2007; De Gaetano, 2007; Garrett, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Velez, 2010; Zarate, 2007). However, in highlighting the various ways that Latino parents support their children’s education at home, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that many low-income Latino parents are directly involved in the schools of their children and in school reform efforts. For example, the work of Olmeda (2003) and Reyes Cruz (2008) highlight how despite poverty, language barriers, and challenges pertaining to their unauthorized status, many Latino immigrant parents have organized and put pressure on the school districts to make the necessary changes for the benefit of their children’s education.
Many participants described how their parents used the limited resources – money, time, and social capital – they had to help their children achieve their educational goals. For example, participants who attended selective enrollment high schools shared that they found out about these schools through their parents who in turn learned about these options through extended family members, friends, co-workers, or other adults. However, perhaps the most striking narratives pertaining to parental use of resources are those of participants whose financially-struggling parents willingly paid for participants’ educational expenses (e.g. tuition, lap tops) and enrichment activities (e.g. study abroad trips). Throughout their academic journey, the strong message that most participants received from their parents was this: if it has to do with education, we’ll find a way to pay for it. Moreover, most participants shared that their parents discouraged them from seeking part-time employment during their high school years (and for some, during their college years) because they did not want their sons to lose focus on their studies. This finding is consistent with empirical results that illustrate the enormous financial sacrifices that many poor low-income parents make to promote their children’s wellness. For example, in a study of 45 Mexican immigrant parents from a low-income, dangerous, urban neighborhood in the Midwest, Cruz-Santiago and Ramirez Garcia (2011) found that the majority of the parents willingly made significant financial sacrifices (e.g., saving to send their children to Mexico, quitting a second job to spend more quality time with their family) for the sake of their children’s well-being. To the extent that

Overall, these findings are consistent with previous studies that have found that many Latino parents are involved and invested in their children’s education. Their involvement usually looks different than that of white middle-class parents (e.g., Ryan et al., 2010); and unfortunately
this distinction is often used to perpetuate unfounded negative stereotypes of Latino parents as apathetic, uninvolved, and uncaring about their children’s education (see Valencia & Black, 2002). This then becomes a convenient excuse for the poor performance of underserved bicultural students – their parents do not care about school or support its aims. Fortunately, the growing body of work in the parental involvement literature provides evidence that many low-income Latino parents are involved, and that their “informal” involvement is also effective. For example, in a recent longitudinal study that examined the effects of formal (i.e., school-based) and informal (i.e., home-based) Latino parent involvement among 1,476 Latino students, LeFevre & Shaw (2011) found that both forms of support were significant predictors of student achievement. These emerging studies provide insight into the multidimensional construct of parent involvement, particularly among poor bicultural parents whom are often demoralized by the current education system (Darder, 2002; 2011; Ramirez, 2003; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Role Models and Sources of Motivation

All participants shared that they were motivated to do well in school by their parents’ demonstration of hard work and resilience in their past and present circumstances. For example, participants regularly witnessed the life stressors that their parents faced as a result of their marginalized position in society. The participants shared that they were proud of their parents’ work ethic, skills set, and strength in enduring these challenges, and for doing whatever it takes to provide an acceptable standard of living for their family. Moreover, participants expressed that their parents’ example motivated them to endure and overcome their own educational challenges. Narratives of participants commuting four hours a day to attend a safe high school with better opportunities are examples that they, like their parents, made the necessary sacrifices to obtain
their goals. Indeed, these kinds of sacrifices were so common among their families that many participants did not think of their own hardships as significant. In the same way that a fish is not aware of the water it swims in, the participants may not have been aware of their own struggles and sacrifices because it was a normative part of life for them, their parents, and other individuals in their surroundings. In her study of 50 Mexican-American highly educated professionals, Gandara (1995) also found that the participants were inspired and motivated by their parents’ persistence and resilience in their employment (e.g., as farm pickers, factory workers, day laborers) and in their everyday struggles associated with poverty, unauthorized status, and limited English-fluency.

In what way do the parents’ demonstration of hard work and resilience influence their children’s academic success? Perhaps the most common motivation for doing well in school expressed by the participants in this study was the desire to make their parents proud. All of the participants reported that they wanted to succeed (academically and economically) to show their parents that their sacrifices are not wasted effort (for similar finding among Latino males, see Schwartz, Guido-Dibrito, Donovan, 2009). Moreover, when asked what motivated their college-going and college completion aspirations, participants expressed a desire to build a better life for them and for their parents; to “pay [their parents] back for all that they have done.” This finding is consistent with the work of Fuligni and colleagues (for review, see Fuligni, 2010) who have found ample evidence that Latino adolescents’ sense of obligation to support, assist, and respect their family serves as an important source of their aspirations and desire to succeed. Further, they have found that although this sense of obligation differs across generations, it is still stronger than that of Euroamerican adolescents. Although these findings do not relate to parental
Involvement per se, they highlight the broad range of parental influences that propel the academic success of low-income Latino students.

Seven participants (or 64% percent) had parents who either completed some years of postsecondary education in their home country, attained a high school diploma or GED in the United States, or were actively seeking a college degree in the U.S. (despite juggling multiple commitments). These parents served as role models for their children. Specifically, some participants shared that their parents had high expectations for them and encouraged them to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them in this country. These participants felt that they had “no excuse” not to excel in their studies. The concept that Latino parents can be examples of educational persistence for their children is not a common discourse in the existent literature. On the contrary, Latino parents are at best depicted as well-intentioned individuals who lack the knowledge, resources, and personal educational experiences to help their children succeed academically (e.g., Cooper, 2011); and at worst as uneducated individuals who teach their children to value work and financial gains over learning and personal growth (see Valencia & Black, 2002). However, the participants’ narratives illustrate that some Latino students are inspired by their parents’ educational trajectories, even when the opportunity structures that allow parents to use education to their own vocational advancement is not necessarily available.

Interdependence

A third set of findings in this study pertains to the interdependence of participants’ families. Namely, participants reported having a close relationship with at least one parent with whom they spent time with and communicated regularly and honestly. This finding is consistent
with the vast theoretical and empirical literature that provides evidence of the high levels of family cohesion in Latino families (e.g., Cruz-Santiago & Ramírez García, 2011; Kiyama, 2011; Ramírez García, Manongdo, & Cruz-Santiago, 2010). In the present study, the narratives pertaining to parent-child interactions provide examples of what family cohesion “looks like” in the everyday. For example, participants expressed that they had regular conversations with their parents about school as well as non-academic topics such as religion and morality, manhood, relationships, politics, family issues, future goals and aspirations, etc. These conversations took place not as planned events in and of themselves, but as natural dialogues that occurred when participants were spending time with their parents engaged in various activities. Research suggests that these types of parent-child interactions are beneficial for youth. For example, parents who can communicate effectively are better able to express their values and beliefs to adolescents, and adolescents who perceive their parents as more responsive are more likely to seek their parents’ advice (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009). Additionally, Davidson and Cardemil, (2009) have suggested that good communication allows parents to provide their children with feedback on what kinds of behaviors are acceptable and which ones are not, which in turn promotes the likelihood of positive youth behaviors (e.g., academic effort).

Most participants described themselves as being independent and self-motivated (especially during their high school years) and they shared that their parents encouraged their independence. Interestingly, participants also reported that they regularly consulted with their parents about academic decisions, despite their parents’ limited experience with the U.S. education system. In this way, participants exercised their independence by making academic decisions based on their own knowledge as well as their parents’ understanding and advice. This
contradicts popular theoretical depictions of Latino immigrant parents as strict and control-oriented, and their U.S.-born children, in turn, as resentful due to the limited independence (see Cauce & Domenech Rodríguez, 2002). However, the finding pertaining to youth autonomy in relation to parental guidance, is consistent with other empirical studies that have found that some Latino parents effectively balance the promotion of youth independence with that of family interdependence (e.g., Auerbach, 2006; 2007; Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011, Orozco, 2008; Ramirez, 2003), and that youth often willingly respect and adhere to their parents guidance (Ceballo 2004; Cavazos et al., 2010; Gandara, 1995, Zalaquett, 2006).

The interdependence of the participants’ families was evident not only in the ways that they spent time together and conversed, but also in how they dealt with hardships (e.g., neighborhood violence, and financial, legal, and marital problems). For example, participants shared that their parents took active steps to limit their sons’ exposure to negative neighborhood influences. Participants also shared the ways that they provided support and assistance to their families, such as translation services, help with younger and disabled siblings, financial support (by either working part-time and/or limiting expenditures), and emotional support during times of crisis. Interestingly, none of the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by these experiences. On the contrary, they shared that they were proud of their ability to support their families, even – as James illustrated with his story about quitting the football team to help his father during a time of severe illness – when they have to make personal sacrifices to do so. These narratives question the hypothesis posed by some researchers that Latino students often feel burdened by the needs of their families (for a critique, see Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Rather, an increasing body of research demonstrates that many Latinos students view favorably
their family responsibilities and that they feel a sense of pride in their ability to assist their parents (e.g., Ceballo, 2004; Gandara 1995; Sanchez, Esparza, Colon, & Davis, 2010; Zalaquett, 2006)

**Implications**

An important implication of this study is that many low-income Latino parents can and do positively influence their children’s education. Furthermore, they do so not necessarily only by enacting school-sanctioned forms of involvement, but by creating a home environment that promotes and supports educational goals as well as close family relationships. Therefore, it is important for educators and researchers concerned with families in schools to acknowledge these forms of parental influences and their direct and indirect impact on academic success. As Auerbach (2007) suggests, we need to “broaden the value-laden, traditional, middle-class definition of what counts as parent involvement to include more open-ended, emic notions of parent support for children’s education, advancement, and wellbeing” (p.g. 278). By doing so, we can refrain from advancing “liberal education discourses” (see Darder, 2011) that portray low-income Latino parents as well-meaning but ill-equipped to have a positive influence in their children’s education (e.g., because of their limited English-proficiency, because they are overworked, because their cultural values are inconsistent with the values of the schools). These “explanations” are not helpful and only further perpetuate unfounded stereotypes that low-income bicultural parents have nothing to offer their children, thus blaming the victim (Ryan, 1971).

Equally problematic are deficit-based efforts that aim to “teach” bicultural parents how to be involved in the schools (e.g., under the guise of promoting “school-home partnerships”; see
Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Shah, 2009). These efforts essentially aim to increase parents’ commitment to their children’s education by increasing parents’ physical presence at the school (usually as unpaid support). And while once again these are often well-intentioned efforts, the net result is a lack of validation of the “invisible” ways that Latino parents are already effectively involved. Strengths-based efforts, on the other hand, can be used to support and enhance what the parents are presently doing in their homes. For example, interventionist can create small-scale, culturally relevant, dialogic parent outreach programs where parents can exchange information, effective strategies, and concerns (Auerbach, 2004). These programs can begin under the direction of bicultural educators and parent advocates, but with the goal that overtime (and with appropriate support structures in place) natural parent leaders will emerge and assume increased governance over these programs (see Hinsdale, Lewis, & Waller, 1995). These types of programs support parents in their educational efforts and facilitate relationship-building with other parents (a suggestion made by Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; and Orozco, 2008). Moreover, these programs have the potential to increase critical consciousness through the process of conscientization (Dader, 2002; Freire, 1993). That is, through group dialogue and reflection on what they know and do not know about the U.S. education system, parents may feel empowered to act critically and in unison to transform the oppressive educational injustices in their local contexts (e.g., see Olmeda, 2003; Reyes Cruz, 2008). Hence, by pursuing both micro-level and macro-level change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such strengths-based, culturally and contextually relevant approaches are more likely to be effective and sustainable. In the history of the United States, all effective forms of resistance began from bottom-up, grassroots forms of
organizations. The struggle against the educational inequities of poor bicultural students is no different.

The implications of this study are similar for youth-based efforts. Namely, both within and outside the school walls, poor bicultural students can benefit from strengths-based interventions that acknowledge and nurture their resilience and extraordinary capacities to succeed. Moreover, given the importance of the family unit in the Latino culture (e.g., Marin & Marin, 1991; ) and the strong relationships that many Latino students have with their parents (e.g., Kiyama, 2011), educational curriculum can be enhanced by incorporating dialogical and reflective spaces that allow students to examine – individually and in peer groups – their families’ histories, values, strengths, and struggles. For example, Luis Moll and colleagues (1992) have documented that the knowledge and skills found in local Latino households (i.e., *funds of knowledge*) can be “capitalized on to organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction [poor] Latino children commonly encounter in the schools” (p.132). Moreover, many of the men in the current study shared that the interviews with me were the first opportunity they had to reflect on their educational trajectory and the critical influence of their parents. They described the interview process as thought-provoking and uplifting, and that it made them more aware of the importance of them finishing college. This suggests that there are benefits in early efforts that encourage family-centered reflections among Latino students. Creating such opportunities is relatively easy and inexpensive. Why wait until a researcher asks them in college to discuss their experiences?
Limitations and Future Directions

The current study provided insightful findings pertaining to the diverse ways that low-income Latino parents influence the trajectory of their children; in this case, their sons. Some limitations, however, need to be addressed. First, the purpose of this study was to understand parental influences on academic success from the points of views of academically successful students. This is an important contribution as much of the existent research has been disproportionately focused on problems within Latino communities rather than normative developmental experiences (see Fuller & Coll, 2010; Raffaelli et al., 2005). However, it is acknowledge that their stories are not representative of all Latino students, particularly those who may not have been educationally successful. Future studies comparing and contrasting parental (and other) influences from students who succeed academically and those who do not, would add much to the parental involvement literature. Specifically, such comparative studies within populations would be helpful in providing empirical support for the interplay between multiple influences (e.g. parental support, adequate school resources, and increased financial aid) in facilitating college enrollment and graduation for poor bicultural students. Additionally, this study was conducted with low-income Latino males from a large urban city in the Midwest, most of who were born in the U.S. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to Latino students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. middle-class Latinos), geographical locations (e.g. rural communities), or immigration status (e.g. unauthorized students). Third, while the multi-method approach incorporated in this study increases the trustworthiness of the findings (Morrow, 2005), retrospective interviews share with other self-report methods the problem of how to capture valid variation in actual behavior, rather than opinion, belief, or values.
concerning that behavior. Observational studies, such as ethnographies (e.g., Carreón et al., 2005), are better suited to distinguish between these varying constructed realities. Finally, academic success in this study was operationalized as the successful transition from high school to a competitive four-year university. Given the low high school graduation and college enrollment rates among Latino males (U.S. Census, 2010), this transition is indeed a form of academic resilience. However, the journey from college enrollment to graduation presents a new set of challenges (see Gloria et al., 2009; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Miller, 2005) that poor bicultural students must overcome if they are to increase their chances for upward mobility. Thus, longitudinal studies that track students through high school and college are better suited to examine the changes and consistencies in parental influences as students mature developmentally and academically, and as they face varying challenges.

Conclusion

This investigation provides insight into the multidimensional construct of parent involvement. Specifically, the results highlight the various ways that low-income Latino parents – often overworked and undereducated themselves – propel, rather than hinder, academic success among their children. This work contributes to the emerging body of research that bring to question deficit-based, victim-blaming conceptualizations of low-income Latino parents and their involvement in their children’s education. Additionally, by examining extraordinary outcomes for individuals from less than ordinary circumstances, this work seeks to increase our understanding of “what works” in the environments that individuals are embedded in. It is my hope that these findings guide and encourage future strengths-based research and interventions, without which we may miss opportunities to capitalize on students’ natural capacities to succeed:
[Placing] so much stock on factors such as language and culture, poverty, crime and drug-ridden neighborhoods, and single-parent households as the primary determinants of learning... fails to recognize the many strengths and capacities that children bring to the classroom, even when their lives are marked by dispossession. (Darder, 2011, p.11)

Finally, in working with poor bicultural parents and their children, it is important not to lose sight of the oppressive structural forces that maintain their marginalized position in our society.

Rather, as the Latino population continues to grow – and the educational inequities for poor bicultural students persist – the “Latino education crisis” should be fought simultaneously on two fronts: One is to demand more and better educational resources for poor bicultural students, and the other is to help these students and their families manage whatever resources are available.

The two efforts are not mutually exclusive.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: TABLES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Father’s Education¹</th>
<th>Mother’s Education¹</th>
<th>Father’s Employment</th>
<th>Mother’s Employment</th>
<th>Family Income</th>
<th>Family Size²</th>
<th>Who attended college in U.S.?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Factory sanitation</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>Dry wall installer</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Bouncer</td>
<td>Florist</td>
<td>$24,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Parent mentor</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lito</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Factory supervisor</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>GED (US)</td>
<td>Some college (US)</td>
<td>Shipping &amp; receiving supervisor</td>
<td>Community center coordinator</td>
<td>$89,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mother, half-brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>Factory supervisor</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>$85,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Some college (US)</td>
<td>12th grade (US)</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Licensing technician</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dad, Twin Brother, Cousin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>GED (US)</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Bus driver</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Uncle, cousin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>Butcher</td>
<td>Homemaker/Housekeeper</td>
<td>$31,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Two brothers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.¹ Unless otherwise noted assume education was attained in country of origin.² Family size includes participant.
TABLE 2. Neighborhood & School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Neighborhood Latino Pop. %</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Average family size</th>
<th>Crime Rate</th>
<th>Rank of High School in Illinois</th>
<th>H.S. graduation</th>
<th>% of Latino Students</th>
<th>Graduating GPA</th>
<th>College Credits earned in H.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>$40,279</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3.7/4.0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>$40,279</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>3.8/4.0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>$25,705</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>3.1/4.0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>$35,283</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3.5/4.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lito</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>$40,083</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4.2/4.0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>$35,283</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>3.3/4.0</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>$57,659</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5.4/5.0</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>$37,406</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>3.4/4.0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>$40,279</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4.1/4.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>$25,705</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>4.6/4.0</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>$47,905</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3.8/4.0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ¹ 2010 Census Data ² National crime rate average is 100 ³ Total number of high schools in Illinois is 667 ⁴ Data from 2010
### TABLE 3: Theme 1

**Parents’ Expressed Commitment to their Children’s Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. Parents’ Intentional Efforts in Communicating the Value of Education</strong></td>
<td>A. Using Themselves as Negative Case Examples</td>
<td><em>My father always said things like, “do well because you don’t want to have to work like I work, in the lowest possible place. You don’t want to work with your hands, you want to work with you mind.”</em></td>
<td>Pedro, Joseph, Adrian, Abraham, Lito, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Explicitly Linking Education with Economic Mobility</td>
<td><em>They always told me that I had to graduate from college if I wanted a career that makes me money and makes me happy. So that’s why I’m here, to get smarter and have a better future.</em></td>
<td>Adrian, James, Danny, Luke, Lito, Oliver, Carlos, Joseph, Abraham, Cesar, Pedro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. Parents’ Monitoring of Academic Progress and Goals</strong></td>
<td>A. Physical Presence at the Elementary School</td>
<td><em>She always went to the school. The principal actually knew her name and they shared a tight bond. It was pretty cool. Now that I realize it, her being involved, it was like another reinforcement that helped me learn. I was always on my work, on my studies, on my homework because I knew she had eyes everywhere in the school.</em></td>
<td>James, Adrian, Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Helping with School Work</td>
<td><em>My mom would always be telling me to do my homework, even when I didn’t have any [laughs]. She would always put a lot of pressure on me so that my homework would be perfect...she would sit there and help me out if she knew stuff. It was annoying sometimes, but I know that it helped because I got straight A's all the way up to 6th grade.</em></td>
<td>Adrian, Cesar, Luke, Danny, Joseph, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C. Providing Incentives to do Well Academically</td>
<td><em>And they would also give me money or buy me games when I got A's and B's...It’s funny, now that I think about it, they were always doing things to steer me in the right direction [laughs].</em></td>
<td>Joseph, Danny, Luke, Oliver, Cesar, Adrian, James, Lito, Pedro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. Balance between Youth Autonomy and Parental Guidance during the High School Years</td>
<td><em>But as much as I say I was independent I would always look to my parents to help me decide things or to see if they were the best way to go... I mean, they basically supported every decision I made, but they always had a say in those decisions because I took their opinions into account. They always encouraged and geared me toward the right path.</em></td>
<td>Joseph, Danny, Lito, Oliver, Adrian, Abraham, James</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### TABLE 3: Theme 1 (continued)

Parents’ Expressed Commitment to their Children’s Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III. Parents’ Use of their Limited Resources</td>
<td>A. Monetary</td>
<td><em>They gave me $7,000 to go to France because it would look good on my resume and they want me to succeed in life...They don’t even see it as a sacrifice, but I know it was their entire savings for the 20 years that they have been married.</em></td>
<td>Lito, Luke, Oliver, Joseph, James, Danny, Adrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Time</td>
<td><em>I had to be in so many meetings, but like Pa would basically give me a ride wherever I needed to go. Even when I asked him to let me take the train, he’d drop me off at the train station and pick me up so that I didn’t walk around anywhere...My parents didn’t go to school a lot but they showed that they care in different ways – giving me a ride, spending time, letting me join like all these sports and groups, telling me to look for scholarships, never pressured me to have a job. I think stuff like that helps a lot.</em></td>
<td>Oliver, Danny, Luke, Adrian, Cesar, Adrian, James, Joseph, Lito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C. Social Networks</td>
<td><em>She never wanted me to go to my neighborhood high school because it was really bad and it was always on the news for shootings and fights...she found out from her friend about the high schools that students have to take a test for...I think her friend had two sons at [competitive high school], so my mom was getting all this information from her and talking to me about it.</em></td>
<td>Lito, Danny, Adrian, James, Joseph, Luke</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 4: Theme 2
Parents as Role Models and Sources of Motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Parents’ Examples of Hard Work and Sacrifice</td>
<td>A. Stories of Challenges Faced in the Past</td>
<td>My dad would tell us his story about how he crossed the river and about how he was homeless for a few months. How he doesn’t want us to go through stuff like that... He always stressed that we could do anything we wanted to do.</td>
<td>Pedro, Danny, Abraham, Cesar, Adrian, James, Joseph, Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Observations of Parents’ Daily Challenges</td>
<td>My father works a lot to support the family and he takes whatever overtime he can get because obviously he needs the money and he wanted to, you know, have us live a normal life... like not sweating during the summer because of no air conditioning, or losing sleep worrying about living on the streets or not having anything to eat...</td>
<td>James, Lito, Abraham, Adrian, Pedro, Cesar, Oliver, Carlos, Joseph, Danny, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C. Parents’ Funds of Knowledge</td>
<td>I think [what he wanted to teach me] was how to fend for myself. He was like “oh you know, yeah I’m poor but I don’t need to get a contractor to fix this house. I don’t need a mechanic to fix the car. I’ll buy the parts. I’ll save whatever labor’s left.” I think that’s why we weren’t that bad off. Weren’t that bad financially because my dad did everything. If he didn’t know how to fix things, we never would have had our own house.</td>
<td>Joseph, Oliver, Danny, Abraham, Luke, Adrian, James, Lito, Pedro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. Participants Motivated by Parents’ Resilience</td>
<td>Seeing him go to work at 4 or 5 in the morning was a big influence for me. I started buckling down and doing the work more to get better grade.</td>
<td>Abraham, Luke, Adrian, Carlos, Cesar, Danny, Lito, Joseph, James, Oliver, Pedro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E. Desire to “Pay” Parents Back</td>
<td>I feel like I owe them so much cause they’ve done a lot for me. When I was little, I told my mom that the first paycheck I get will go to her. Before I get a house, I’m gonna get her a house so she can have her own garden. When I get a career, I want to do that; put my goals aside and give something back to her.</td>
<td>Luke, Cesar, Carlos, James, Abraham, Danny, Adrian, Oliver, Joseph, Lito, Pedro</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## TABLE 4: Theme 2 (continued)

Parents as Role Models and Sources of Motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. Parents’ Example of Educational Persistence</td>
<td>A. Parents who Completed Postsecondary Education in their Home Country</td>
<td>My mom has always backed me up with my studies and I feel that I am motivated because of her. If it wasn’t for her, then I wouldn’t have taken my studies as seriously because my dad did not graduate from elementary school and my mom graduated from college [in Mexico] so she was basically the one that kept me motivated because she wanted me to be like her and not be like my dad.</td>
<td>Oliver, Danny, Lito, Joseph,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Parents who Pursued Education in the U.S.</td>
<td>My dad [got his GED at the age of 47 so that he could advance in his job], he had to do what he had to do, and that’s what I have to do… Little by little, my mom started working for community centers or different schools and my mom finally got a job where she was running a center herself and she still is! She wasn’t going to school when she started but then she got in to school through her organization. I think she got some scholarship or something to help her…She’s in school, she’s a mom, she’s taking care of the house, working, and paying my college tuition.</td>
<td>Danny, James, Luke, Adrian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 5: Theme 3

Interdependent Family Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. Parent-Child Interactions that Promoted Closeness</strong></td>
<td>A. Spending Quality Time Together</td>
<td>So my dad introduced me to sports, like soccer and basketball when I was in 4th grade. He taught me how to play, trained me. I'm already 18 and he's 50 years old. He still plays with me. We watch basketball games, and other sports together... We're also both into cars. I like the engines, and learning how to change things. We kid around, but we also talk about serious stuff. Like he tells me how to treat women and how to drink responsibly. He's teaching me like all the things he knows about being a man. He can pass it on to his son, so I can pass it on to mine.</td>
<td>Lito, James, Danny, Adrian, Oliver, Cesar, Pedro, Joseph, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Consistent and Honest Communication</td>
<td>I could always turn to my parents if I was confused about something or had a question. They would always be honest and sincere about it. They were blunt and told me how it was instead of giving mixed messages... When it came to decisions affecting the whole household we would discuss each of our opinions and talk about them to get to a decision.</td>
<td>James, Danny, Joseph, Cesar, Lito, Oliver, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. Youth Independence in Relation to Family Interdependence</strong></td>
<td>A. Youth Initiative and Autonomy in Making Academic Decisions</td>
<td>They never really forced anything on me or even told me to do my homework. It was just self-motivation, like this is what I have to do.</td>
<td>Adrian, Luke, Abraham, Cesar, Pedro, Joseph, Danny, Lito, Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Youth Actively Sought their Parents’ Guidance</td>
<td>But as much as I say I was independent I would always look to my parents to help me decide things or to see if they were the best way to go... I mean, they basically supported every decision I made, but they always had a say in those decisions because I took their opinions into account.</td>
<td>Joseph, Lito, Oliver, James, Danny</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**TABLE 5: Theme 3 (continued)**

**Interdependent Family Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Narrative Examples</th>
<th>Which Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III. Facing Family Hardships Together</td>
<td>A. Protection from Negative Neighborhood Influences</td>
<td>My parents were pretty strict about me going out. Even if I was just going to hang out with my friends, they wanted to know every single detail, especially my mom. She wouldn’t let me go to my friends’ houses if she didn’t know them.</td>
<td>Oliver, Luke, Pedro, Adrian, Abraham, Lito, Joseph, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Marital Problems</td>
<td>My dad had an affair last year and that kind of brought me down a bit, but I struggled through it and was still able to like continue with school and sports. I kinda hated my dad after I found out and even to this day it’s hard for me to talk to him. Like because of trust…but we’ve moved on and we’re better because of it.</td>
<td>Cesar, Oliver, Luke, Pedro, Carlos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C. Unemployment and Legal Issues</td>
<td>The second time [dad] went to jail we didn’t have any more savings. We didn’t have any source of income at all. We were just so poor like it was ridiculous how poor we were. I would need two dollars for a field trip and my mom wouldn’t be able to give it to me...Everything was public aid; our food, our doctors, everything. The only thing we couldn’t pay were bills and we just let that debt accumulate.</td>
<td>Luke, Pedro, Abraham, Carlos, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. Youth &amp; Family Coping Strategies</td>
<td>Music is a huge way for me to express feelings. Like when you hear music you hear feeling in the music and that’s how I can explain it. I don’t necessarily have many things that directly say how I’m feeling. But I like the way that I can create something that like will always be there no matter what.</td>
<td>Abraham, Luke, Cesar, Pedro, Lito, Carlos, Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E. Youth’s Contribution to Family Wellness</td>
<td>Junior year, my dad was really sick. He had acid reflux and something wrong with his pancreas. He lost about 20 lbs in a month. During this time I was trying out for the basketball team in high school and found out I made it. I stuck with it for some time but with my dad being sick I decided to quit and help my dad do his coaching job instead. I wanted to be on the basketball team but I knew I had to help my dad out. It was the right thing to do.</td>
<td>Cesar, James, Danny, Luke, Abraham, Adrian, Joseph, Lito, Oliver, Pedro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES
Carlos

Carlos is a 19-year-old Mexican-American male who was born and raised in the United States. His parents got divorced when Carlos was 5, and his father died of cancer when Carlos was in middle school. His mother was a homemaker when she was married, but began to work the night shift in a factory when she became the sole breadwinner of the home. Carlos comes from a rather large family; from his mother and father he has 3 siblings – two sisters (36 and 26 years of age) and a brother (32 years of age). He also has half siblings from his father’s side – two sisters, ages 25 and 17, and two brothers ages 13 and 8. At the time of the interview, Carlos reported that his family income is $30,000 for a family of 4.

Carlos grew up in an urban neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. It is about 67% Latino, has a median income of $40,300 with an average family size of 3.8, and has a crime rate that is three time the national average. Carlos describes his neighborhood as having some gangs and related violence. There was an occasional shooting, but he states that this did not happen as often as in other Chicago neighborhoods. Even so, he views his neighborhood as safe and describes it as having friendly neighbors. He reported that there were times when he was approached by gang members, but that nothing serious ever happened to him.

Carlos attended his neighborhood elementary and junior high schools, where the majority of the students identified as Latina/o. He shared that, during his junior high school years, he often “acted out” and gave teachers a hard time (e.g., correcting them when they made a mistake, not listening to their instructions). He stated that although he did this as a way to seek attention from his fellow peers, his grades did not suffer and he maintained mostly A’s and B’s. Carlos attended a selective, but not highly competitive high school (it is ranked 539/669 in Illinois). He describes the school as segregated between the “smart kids” who were placed in a competitive fast-track program that prepared them for college, and the “other kids” who were not viewed as college material and therefore were not seen as worthy of the school’s limited resources. These “smart kids” also benefited from extra attention and college information from counselors and teachers. Carlos did not want to be in the program that prepared students for college because he did not want to do “all the extra work.” Instead, he opted to take honors classes, which were a little more challenging than the normal course load. He was also part of the football team for 4 years, and become involved in a paid after school tutoring program that lead to employment during the summer breaks. He graduated high school with a GPA of 3.7/4.0 and in the top 10% of his graduating class. He did not earn college credits in high school.

Carlos shared that his mother encouraged him to do well in school during his early schooling, but did not want him to go away to college when it was time to make a decision. She would have much rather have him attend a community college for two years and find a good paying job that was enough to get by. Therefore, his older siblings were the ones who put pressure on him to attend a four-year institution. Specifically, Carlos describes his older brother as being the father figure that was never there for him. Following the separation of his parents and subsequent death of his father, Carlo’s older brother became the “man of the house.” He provided emotional and financial support to Carlos and his mother, and encouraged Carlos to excel in his studies. During the interview Carlos shared that he felt some anger towards his biological father and that he did not feel sadness when he died.
Carlos is the third member of his immediate family to go to college. He has an older sister who graduated from a 4-year private university in Chicago after getting pregnant at the young age of 16. Carlos shared that he has great respect and admiration for his sister because of what she has been able to achieve (e.g., good career and stable marriage) despite having her child at such an early age. She is one of Carlos’ main sources of support and motivation. Another one of his sisters attended a community college in the city for a few years. He is the first one to go away to college. No other members of his immediate or extended family have pursued a college education. Carlos shared that he views college as a way to get a better job and be able to support his mother in the future. He reported that this is what motivates him to keep going even though he was having trouble adjusting to the college environment and was at risk of being on academic probation. At the time the interview took place, he was pledging a fraternity and that became his number one priority so some of his grades suffered. Overall, Carlos is a resilient young man who has overcome a number of hardships in pursuit of his education. At the time of the interview, he was unsure what he wanted to major in but expressed interest in engineering.

Pedro

Pedro is an 18-year-old Mexican male who was born and raised in Chicago. He has three sisters (ages, 15, 22, and 23) and a 9-year-old brother. His mother was born in Chicago and attended high school until her sophomore year when she became pregnant and dropped out. She is primarily a homemaker, but works odd jobs here and there (e.g. she worked with the Census Bureau this past summer). She also worked full-time when she became the primary breadwinner for a period of time. Pedro’s father is a Mexican immigrant born in Michoacan, Mexico where he attended school up until 6th grade. He has resided in the United States for 30 years and has worked as a drywaller since he arrived. Pedro’s parents are fluent in both English and Spanish. At the time of the interview, Pedro reported an average family income of $25,000 for a family of 5. His parents have been married for 24 years.

Pedro grew up in a neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago that is 67% Latino and has a median income of approximately $40,000. Additionally, the crime rate index for this neighborhood is three times the national average. Pedro shared that there is a strong presence of gangs, as well as drugs and other illegal activities, in his neighborhood. He also shared that he was often approached by gang members to get involved in their activities, but that he always resisted these pressures. He shared that most of the young people in his neighborhood did not care about school or their future, and even if they did, they did not want to put in the effort that it takes to “get out the ghetto.” After Pedro’s sophomore year in high school, his family moved in with his maternal grandmother due to financial reasons. Pedro shared that his new neighborhood was nicer and less dangerous than his previous neighborhood. Currently his family lives in a neighborhood near Midway Airport.

Pedro attended his neighborhood elementary and middle schools. For high school, he attended a magnet school that is ranked 537 amongst all of the high schools in Illinois (667). The graduation rate for this high school is 72%, and the college enrollment rate is 56%. The student body is approximately 77% Latino. Pedro shared that he was a good student in elementary school and that he knew he was smart because he was able to understand the concepts being taught fairly easily. However, during his middle school years, he began to care less about school and his
grades suffered as a result. He attributed this change to negative peer influences; specifically, being surrounded with so many students whom he believed did not care about their schooling. A critical turning point for Pedro occurred during his first year of high school when he failed art and biology. As a result of his poor performance, he was placed in easier classes during sophomore year. In other words, he was placed on the vocational rather than the college track. Pedro stated that this was a wakeup call for him because he knew he was intelligent and a more capable student than what his grades portrayed. Around the same time, his sister was in the process of applying for colleges, scholarships, and internships, and receiving offers. This motivated Pedro to change his ways because he believed that he was smarter than his sister and that he was also capable of going to college. As a result, he began to focus on his studies and ultimately he received high enough grades that he was placed into AP courses. After that he received straight A’s for about 6 semesters and ended up turning his 1.2 freshmen GPA into a 3.75 by the time he graduated. Pedro also became involved in school activities. For example, he joined the football team and eventually became captain. He shared that playing football had a big impact in learning about the importance of hard work and dedication. He also became the vice president of the student council, and he worked during the summers as a recreational leader for the local park district. Lastly, he was part of a program which provided him with the opportunity of doing projects relating to rewarding careers and developing marketable job skills. He did not come to the U of I with any college credits.

Pedro attributes his educational success primarily to his own internal motivation and dedication to do well in school. He reported that the counselors at his high school “did a terrible job” helping students navigate school and the college application process. He shared that he took the initiative to conduct his own research about colleges, including what he needed to do to be competitive and what the application process entailed. He stated that he did so much research, that he became an unofficial counselor to many of his friends and convinced at least five of them to apply to college. Pedro expressed that his girlfriend in high school was a significant influence in helping him be more outgoing, comfortable, and social amongst his peers rather than withdrawn and distrustful. He shared that he had a variety of friends from different types of crowds, but that his closest friends were the students who wanted to do well and excel in school.

Pedro also discussed different ways his family influenced his education journey. For example, he shared that his older sisters were and continue to be an inspiration for him (his eldest sister has recently graduated from a 4-year private university). He is particularly close with his eldest sister and considers her his best friend. Pedro also shared that his father was an influential person in his life, although not in the traditional sense. Specifically, Pedro reported that his father played a large part in bringing distress to the family during Pedro’s formative years – through infidelity, selling drugs, and regular periods of imprisonment which put the family in severe poverty. Despite this negative example, Pedro shared that his father motivated him because he constantly communicated with Pedro that he did not want him to follow in his footsteps. His father repeatedly told Pedro that he was smart and that he could do anything he wanted to as long as he focused on his studies. His father also took him to work to show him the kind of arduous job (e.g. drywaller) Pedro can expect if he does not go to college. Pedro shared that this motivated him to do well in school, and he believes that despite his father’s shortcomings, he would have dropped out of school without his father’s counsel and presence in his life. He expressed a high level of respect and appreciation for his father. In terms of his mother, Pedro shared that she is a
warm and loving mother that would do anything for her family. Pedro shared that she did not provide much academic support or guidance, but that she provided all her children with lots of love, especially during the very difficult times they went through as a family.

Overall, Pedro is an intelligent, articulate, and driven young man who has overcome much adversary in his life to get to college. His goals for a higher education and ultimately a better life allowed him to continue to work through the various hardships he faced. He also shared that his passion for music helped him to stay positive about life and to continue doing what he was doing. At the U of I, he plans to do the same thing he did in high school and get involved. He shared that he wants to do well academically, but that he also wants to take advantage of all that this school has to offer. One way he has begun this journey is by joining a multi-cultural frat where he has already formed a lot of new friendships. His intended major is Economics, and his goal is a career that focuses on rebuilding low-income communities and helping those living in poverty.

Oliver

Oliver is an 18-year-old Mexican male who was born and raised in Chicago. He has three brothers – ages 13, 20, & 24 (half-brother), and two sisters – ages 12 and 23 (half-sister). Oliver’s father is a Mexican immigrant born in Michoacan, Mexico who arrived here at the age of 18 and received a junior high education up until 6th grade. Oliver stated that his father was a great soccer player in Mexico, and so when his father initially came to the United States, he easily attained employment through soccer as bribery in exchange to play for a team, and/or as a soccer coach. He has resided in the United States for 30 years and is currently employed as a bouncer at different night clubs. Oliver’s mother was born in Guerrero, Mexico. She received a professional accounting degree in Mexico before immigrating to the United States over 25 years ago. She currently works as a florist in the family’s flower shop. Oliver’s parents primarily speak Spanish, but he states that they do know some English. At the time of the interview, Oliver reported that his family income is $24,000 for a family of 6. His parents have been married for 23 years.

Oliver’s family currently lives in a neighborhood that is approximately 53% Latino and has a median income of $25,700. Additionally, the crime rate index for his neighborhood is almost 2 ½ times the national average. Oliver shared that he lives in a dangerous neighborhood and expressed that he would like to move to a better and nicer neighborhood someday. He recalls seeing people pull out guns and do drive by shootings at cars. One vivid tragedy he recalls is hearing gun shots in front of his house and then going outside to see his friend on the ground bleeding from a bullet that “got him.” Oliver explained that his friend had two older brothers who were in gangs, and that this shooting was probably a “message” from a rival gang. Oliver shared that he still remembers seeing one of the older brothers “crying his eyes out” over the loss of his brother. Oliver reported that his parents were not able to move out of the neighborhood due to economic reasons. Nevertheless, he shared that they did their best to protect him and his siblings and to make sure that they were exposed to positive opportunities. For example, Oliver shared that his parents consistently told him to stay away from gang members, and they also organized their schedules in a way that allowed them to give their children rides to/from school and activities. Oliver also shared that his father was adamant about getting Oliver and his
siblings involved in sports and in other activities where they were surrounded by positive peers. These activities usually took place in other neighborhoods. Additionally, Oliver reported that his parents bought video game systems to keep them playing inside the house instead of the dangerous neighborhood.

Oliver went to a small charter high school of about 400 students that his older brother also attended. The school is ranked 595 (out of 667) amongst all of the high schools in Illinois, with a graduation rate of 65% and a college enrollment rate of 43%. The student body at his school was roughly 65% African American, and 30% Latino. Oliver shared that his school created a supportive environment and had many opportunities for students. He initially did not do well during his first year of high school, but decided to focus more on school after his older brother went through a period of academic difficulty. Oliver describes his teachers as very supportive and encouraging, and that (due to the low student: teacher ratio) all students received personalized attention. He shared that he and his friends constantly received positive feedback from their teachers and support to do well and succeed. He remembers always receiving remarks such as, “you are going to make it far in life,” and “you are a great person and student.” He also shared that instead of suspending students for a fight, his school’s policy was to require students to discuss their issue and settle it amongst themselves. Oliver was actively involved in a variety of sports (basketball, baseball, soccer, and tennis), honors courses, and student clubs. His school did not offer AP courses so he did not have the opportunity to gain college credits in high school. However, Oliver was accepted to a selective college prep program that provides comprehensive resources and structured support to prepare underserved students in Chicago to be admitted to and graduate from 4-year universities. A teacher at his high school informed Oliver about the program. In this program, Oliver received ACT preparation, guidance with the college application process, and assistance with scholarship applications, including a $4000 scholarship which he received. Additionally, he shared that he continues to receive support from this program via regular phone check-ins and advice about how to navigate college successfully. He graduated high school with a cumulative GPA of 3.11 (on a 4.0 scale).

Oliver shared that he did not feel any peer pressure in high school. He stated he was “cool” because he was a star athlete, but was also known as being a “nerd” because everyone knew that he cared about school, so he was a “cool nerd.” He also expressed that he was friends with a variety of different people – “street kids” as well as “school kids.” He got along with everyone, and although he himself stayed away from alcohol, drugs, and gangs, many of his friends did not. Nevertheless, he stated that those were his friends and that he does not judge them because some of them simply did not have the opportunities that he had or grew up in the loving home environment that he did. He also shared that many of his friends, although qualified, could not afford to attend 4-year colleges.

Oliver shared that his parents were a significant influence in his education journey. His parents always motivated him to do well in school and encouraged him to join any clubs or organizations he wanted. His father was particularly influential. His father encouraged all his children to get involved with school activities, especially sports. He also made sure to be available to drive Oliver to his activities and be part of his sports games. He even bought Oliver a car for all his hard earned efforts in school. Oliver expressed great appreciation for his parents and the sacrifices they made for their children’s education. He shared that although his parents were not
connected to the school and did not visit the schools regularly or maintain contact with his teachers, they were involved in other ways that were just as (if not more) effective, such as allowing him to join organizations, giving him rides, telling him to look for scholarships, not pressuring him to find a job, and generally caring about his education. Oliver’s older brother (the one who is two years older than him) also provided him with a motivation to do well. Their parents sometimes would compare both of them, which instilled a friendly family competition between the two brothers. In general, Oliver shared that he always looked up to his brother and continues to seek his advice even now that he is in college. He expressed that his bother pushes him to do better and that his brother paved the way for him. His brother is currently a senior at a public university majoring in Architecture. Oliver shared that he and his brother want to motivate their younger siblings and push them to do well in school so that they too can go to 4-year colleges. Oliver’s extended family is also a source of support and motivation. He shared that his aunts and uncles ask him how he is doing in school and tell him that they are proud of him. For example, one of his uncles calls him regularly to encourage Oliver not to give up and to keep working hard even in tough times because he knows that Oliver will graduate from college and that it will all be worth it in the end.

Overall, Oliver feels very grateful for where he is now in his life and his educational journey. He is certain that he is in college for a reason and that he will successfully complete his degree. He knew coming here was a big deal because he realized that not many people got accepted to big schools such as the University of Illinois, so he wants to make his family proud of him by graduating. At the time of the interview, he reported that he is not sure what he wants to major in. He is currently (a year after the interview) in the college of Applied Health and Sciences majoring in Rehabilitation Studies. His goal after college is to attend graduate school and become a Physical Therapist. He expressed that he has a passion for sports and wants to work exclusively with athletes.

Joseph

Joseph is a 19-year-old Mexican-American male who was born and raised in the United States. He has one sister who is 5 years younger than him. His mother and father emigrated from Mexico 22 years ago to provide their children with a better life. In Mexico, his mother completed eighth grade and his father attained the equivalent of a high school diploma. His father currently works for a small factory and his mother was a homemaker up until Joseph was in sixth grade, when she began to work in his school as a parent mentor. Joseph’s parents are not fluent in English so Spanish is the primary language spoken in the home by all members of the family. At the time of the interview, Joseph reported that his family income is $40,000 for a family of 4. His parents have been married for 22 years.

Joseph grew up in a neighborhood located in the northwest part of Chicago. It is about 55% Latino, has a median income of $35,283, average family size of 2.52, and has a crime rate that is twice the national average. He described the neighborhood as having a significant gang presence, frequent shootings, and a lot of “police activity.” Joseph attended his neighborhood elementary school, which was also affected by gangs. He shared that many of his peers eventually lost interest in school and became involved with the wrong crowd. Joseph, on the other hand, always did well in school and was favored by many of his teachers. For example, he had a teacher in
seventh and eighth grade that encouraged him to apply to the selective high schools in Chicago and helped him with that process. In general, Joseph put a lot of effort into his school work and was able to excel. This did not make him popular with his peers, but he said that he did not care because he was not interested in being friends with the students who were not focused on their studies.

Joseph shared that his parents were very involved in his education and frequently communicated to him that it was his job to excel in his studies. He shared that, during his primary school years, his parents provided him with incentives for his good grades and punished him when he “acted up” in school. He also shared that his parents were very protective over him and did not allow him to play outside unless it was in the backyard. Additionally, his parents did not want him to attend the “bad, gang-infested” neighborhood high schools, so they supported Joseph in his decision to apply to and attend a selective enrollment school that was approximately an hour commute (each way) from his home. In addition to this direct involvement in his schooling, Joseph expressed that his parents influenced his education in other (more indirect) ways. For example, he proudly recounted the story of how his family ended up being homeowners. Namely, they bought an abandoned property when Joseph was in grade school and his father spent approximately 6 months working on it before they moved in. Joseph, who spent the afternoons with his father at the house, stated that he learned a lot from watching his father build their future home. Specifically, he shared that he learned that anything worth having requires a lot of work and sacrifice (e.g., his dad worked on the house after he got home from his 12-hour work day). He also became aware that although his parents may not have formal education, they nevertheless have valuable skills that contribute to the family’s well-being and allow them to enjoy benefits (e.g., homeownership) that they would not be able to afford based on their income alone. Overall, he shared that his parents have been the greatest influence in his life.

Joseph attended a college preparatory school, the 3rd highest ranking school in the state of Illinois. He shared that the relative “easy” curriculum in his middle school ill-prepared him for the advanced courses at his high school. He contemplated transferring a few times because he was not used to struggling with his studies and did not feel that he could make it. He thought, “if I went to [neighborhood high school], I would be the smartest student there.” However, his mother encouraged him to stick to it, reassured him that he belonged and that he could succeed at the selective high school, and told him to seek help from his teachers and others at the school, which he did. For example, he shared that after getting negative feedback on his writing skills from his literature teacher, he reached out to him and met with him frequently to go over his work and improve his writing skills. He said that he was hard on him, but that he appreciated that because, although he earned a C in the class, he worked hard for that grade and learned a lot from his teacher in the process. Once Joseph began to master the course material for his difficult classes, he gained confidence in his academic skills and became more involved in the school. For example, he took AP and honors courses, became the captain of the baseball team, and took on leadership roles in school clubs and special programs (e.g., he studied abroad in Spain). Overall, Joseph spoke very highly of his high school. He graduated with a GPA of 3.5 on a 4-point scale. He shared that the school was more diverse (in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status) than his previous schools, which allowed him to meet and become friends with a wide variety of students. He also stated that the school has many opportunities and resources to excel in high school and to prepare students well for college. He feels that he is “ahead of the game” at the U
of I because of the high school that he attended. He attained 11 college credits as a high school student.

Joseph describes himself as being very independent and motivated when it comes to his education. He is the first individual in his immediate and extended family to attend college, so he reportedly had to figure things out on his own. An example of his ability to make calculated choices for his academic benefit was his decision not to be part of the baseball team during his junior year of high school. Although he is passionate about baseball and was the captain of the team, he decided that he needed to dedicate himself solely to his academics so that he could be competitive for colleges. He made this decision despite the fact that his coach and his teammates strongly encouraged him to continue being part of the team. Throughout the interviews it was clear that Joseph is a motivated young man who takes initiative in his education. At the same time, he also shared that he always sought support and guidance when he needed it, especially from his parents whom he consulted with just about everything. In this way, Joseph’s decisions were always influenced by the guidance of the adults in his life.

Overall, Joseph is a bright young man who has always been dedicated to his education. He shared that his family is very proud of him and that his mother consistently “brags” about him to extended family members in the U.S. and in Mexico, as well as to her friends. She told him that everyone, including his old teachers, is very proud of him and that many are praying for him to continue to do well in school. Joseph shared that his parents are making a lot of sacrifices so that he can attend the U of I, so he is doing whatever he can to make sure that their sacrifices are worth it – he is doing well academically; is an active member of university-based organizations such as the Latina/o cultural center, a program for Hispanic engineers, and the baseball club while applying to scholarships (one of which he asked me to help him with and he received). His intended major is Technical Systems Management, a field that combines engineering and business. In the future, he plans to use the training he receives at the U of I to start a construction company that builds affordable housing in low-income communities while creating jobs for manual labor workers like his father.

**Lito**

Lito is a 19-year-old Mexican male who was born and raised in Chicago. He has a younger brother 3 years his junior, and a sister 8 years his junior. Both of his parents were born in Michoacan, Mexico and have resided in the United States for 20+ years. His mother obtained her degree in communications in Mexico and worked as a teacher and a secretary for the governor during her time there. Unfortunately, neither her education nor employment credentials carried over when she immigrated to the states. As a consequence, she has primarily been a homemaker and took on odd jobs here and there (e.g., babysitting, cleaning, Sunday school teacher, etc.). Lito’s father received an elementary education in Mexico up until the 4th grade. His father has primarily worked in factories and is currently working as a supervisor in a factory. Lito’s parents primarily speak in Spanish, but his mother is also able to communicate slightly in English. At the time of the interview, Lito reported an average family income of $35,000 for a family of 5. His parents have been married for 20 years.
Lito’s family currently lives in a neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago in the same house he grew up in. The population of the neighborhood is 36% Latino and the median income is approximately $40,000. Additionally, the crime rate index for this neighborhood is almost twice the national average. Lito did not recall much violence occurring in his neighborhood and stated that he feels his neighborhood is safe and that he never felt scared walking around at night. He does share that his parents were very strict with him and tried to limit his exposure to the neighborhood by not allowing him to play outside when he was younger, and by enforcing an early curfew when he was in high school. He also shared that they consistently discussed with him the importance of staying away from “bad” influences.

Lito attended his local neighborhood schools for elementary and middle school. He shared that he was generally a good student and that he received mostly A’s and B’s in his classes. For high school, Lito went to a very competitive college preparatory, highly selective and ranked 6 amongst all of the high schools in Illinois. This school has a graduation rate of 92% and a college enrollment rate of 77%; the student body is 43% Latino. Lito shared that his mother was the one who encouraged him to apply to this school. He reported that his mother learned about this school from a friend who had a son there. As a result, Lito’s mother had conversations with him when he was in middle school about the importance of doing well academically so that he can be admitted to a good, safe high school. She repeatedly saw their neighborhood school on the local news due to shootings and other negative occurrences, so she wanted to make sure that her son understood the importance of going to a high school away from the neighborhood. She told him that she did not mind paying so that he could take the bus. As a result of this insistence from his mother, Lito sought out guidance from his teachers in middle school and applied to selective enrollment high schools.

Lito shared that he did well in high school. He appreciated the diversity of the school and the opportunities to interact and learn from many types of people. He also took AP courses and participated in clubs and programs such as the French club, and later a program that helps freshmen make a successful transition from middle school. A significant opportunity that influenced Lito’s life was a 3-week trip in the summer of 2009 to Spain, France, Italy, Monaco, and Vatican City. This trip was sponsored by a national program focused on cross-cultural communication, and the purpose was to “learn about the different Mediterranean traditions and establish relationships with young natives in order to hopefully one day have a more peaceful future between America and these European nations.” He was found out about this trip from his French teacher. Lito shared that he is greatly appreciative to his parents for paying for this trip. The cost was approximately $7000 and his parents essentially wiped out their entire savings to pay for it because they believed it would be a great educational opportunity for Lito, which was. In the summer of 2010 he went on another trip to Europe; this time a 9-day trip to France that was free because of his participation in a two-year program organized by his French teacher who Lito described as passionate and engaging, and who made Lito “fall in love” with the language. The purpose of the trip to Paris was to fully immerse himself in the French culture and interact with French people in their native land.

With regards to peers, Lito shared that his high school friends had similar academic goals and that they supported each other. He expressed, however, that he felt that they underestimated him because they were often surprised to learn that he was doing so good in his classes. He does not
know why they were surprised. In terms of his neighborhood friends, Lito shared that he lost contact with them after a while, but that he has learned that many of them are either in gangs or already have children. In generally, Lito excelled in his high school studies and received various forms of recognition for his performance, especially in math. He graduated with a GPA of 4.2/4.0. He entered the U of I with 21 college credits.

Lito expressed that his parents were the biggest influence in his educational success thus far, particularly his mother who had completed a college degree in Mexico. He shared that she was the one that always talked to him about the importance of an education, and always encouraged him to focus on his studies and get involved in school activities. He stated that although she rarely attended his schools or spoke to his teachers, she was very involved in his education. Lito shared that his father is a hardworking man and that he often works multiple jobs and overtime hours to make sure that the family is provided for. Lito expressed great appreciation for his father’s work ethic and his dedication to the family. He shared that he wants to make his parents proud and “not waste” the sacrifices they have made.

When asked why he thinks other students from his neighborhood do not succeed in school, Lito expressed that many students in his neighborhood lack the internal drive and motivation to persist. He believes many students fail to think about the “big picture” about why doing well in school is important – namely, for the economic advantage that you have later in life. Moreover, Lito stated that while he is very lucky to have been admitted to his high school, he feels that he would have done well even if he went to his neighborhood high school because he is not someone who quits easily. He shared that once he sets a goal in his mind, he works hard until he achieves it.

Lito stated that thus far he has made a lot of friends in college and that he is enjoying meeting new people. He has also made efforts to get involved in different organizations on campus to gain an overall well rounded experience during his time at the university. His intended major is Math. He would like to either become a math teacher or go into international business. He likes to learn about different parts of the world and learn about different cultures and different countries, so he sees himself enjoying a career that requires frequent international traveling.

**James**

James is a 19-year-old Mexican-American male who was born and raised in the United States. He has one sister (who is 6 years his senior) and two older brothers (a half-brother that is 27 years of age, and a full brother that is 1 year older than James and is physically and mentally disabled). Currently, his mother works 10-12 hours a day as a coordinator for a community center, managing recreational activities for kids in the neighborhood. She is also a part time student at a public university. His father and mother are fluent in both English and Spanish. His father worked on the assembly line for a shipping and receiving company when he first come to the United States, but eventually moved up to a supervisor position after earning his GED. At the time of the interview, James reported that his family income is $89,000 for a family of 6. His parents have been married for 26 years.
James grew up in a neighborhood located in the northwest part of Chicago. It is about 55% Latino, has a median income of $35,283 and has a crime rate that is twice the national average. The average family size for this neighborhood is 2.5. James described his neighborhood as somewhat dangerous and full of illegal activities — such as drug use and gang-related violence — that, unfortunately, many of his friends from grade school became involved in. He also shared that many of his peers attended the neighborhood high school, which James describes as a “really bad school.” James, on the other hand, attended a selective enrollment school that is ranked 492 out of 667 in Illinois. He reported that he did not receive high enough scores on his entrance exam to be admitted to this school, but that his counselor (who was the one who encouraged him to apply to selective high schools) was “able to pull a few strings” and get him admitted. This counselor also encouraged James to get involved in a program to prevent kids from using drugs at his high school. James stated that he really liked the program and that he eventually took on a leadership role in the program, which he really enjoyed. Additionally, he reported that he took one AP English Composition and Literature and that although he did not earn college credits for this class, he felt that it prepared him well for writing courses in college. Aside from this AP class, James did not feel like his school was particularly challenging. He felt that as long as he completed his work and tried a bit he could get good grades. He also shared that his high school had great counselors that helped him out in whatever he needed, like tutoring for the ACT and general academic advice. He graduated with a GPA of 3.3 on a 4-point scale. He did not earn college credits in high school.

James shared that his parents were heavily involved in his early education, particularly his mother who was active in his elementary school (e.g., as a volunteer) and built personal relationships with the principal and other school staff. James reported that she did this to ensure that his brother (who is disabled) had the resources and services that he needed. James expressed great admiration and respect for his mother. He reported that she is the hardest working woman that he knows because she is able to balance work, house chores, family obligations, and college courses. He is very proud of his mother and is personally motivated by her ambition. He shared that she is the biggest reason why he is a student at the U of I and not a high school dropout. His father is also a great motivator for James. He appreciates the sacrifices he makes like the long commute to work every day to make sure his family always has food to eat, a roof over their head, and the necessities to live a decent life. He shared that him and his father play various sports together and share an interest in cars. These common interests have provided many opportunities for bonding (e.g., conversations about manhood) throughout James’ childhood and adolescence.

It was clear throughout the interviews that James played an active role in the family and helped with family responsibilities. For example, James shared that he worked a variety of jobs (e.g., in an afterschool program, at a pharmacy, etc.) during high school so that he did not have to rely on his parents for money. He worked many hours a week but shared that it he effectively balanced work and school so that his grades did not suffer. James also shared that he helped his parents by taking care of his disabled brother — driving him to school, preparing his meals, watching over him, etc. In a way, he acted as the older brother even though he was the youngest. James expressed that he felt good about helping his parents both financially and with his brother, even though his brother tested his patience at times. Moreover, James discussed an instance during his junior year when his father was really sick and could not handle a second job so James (without
hesitation) dropped the basketball team he longed to be part of so that he could help his father. This is yet another example of this young man’s dedication to his family.

Lastly, James shared that he felt a sense of obligation to do well and to make his parents proud. Specifically, if he graduates from college, he will be the first child from both parents to earn a 4-year degree. His half-brother successfully graduated from a private university, but his sister dropped out because she was not able to handle both the social and academic aspects of college life. James learned a lot from her mistakes and shared that he does not want to put his parents through what she did.

James shared that he is adjusting well to college. He is satisfied with his academic performance and expressed that, so far, he is able to balance his academics with part-time work and with social and extracurricular activities. He shared that he felt somewhat prepared because he has an older cousin who graduated from the U of I and she gave him a lot of good advice about “how the college environment works”. The major challenge for him and his parents has been paying for college. James shared that his parents are struggling to pay for his education and that he does not know if they can withstand to pay for four years of college, especially since his mother is also attending college and is not able to work a second job. James intends to prepare himself for a career in Physical Therapy. A year after the interview, he reported that he has declared a major in Community Health, with a specialization in Rehabilitation Studies. Overall, James is proud of himself and his parents, and shared that – as long as he and his family can continue to pay for college – he expects to complete his 4-year degree and attend graduate school.

Cesar

Cesar is an 18-year-old Mexican male who was born in the United States and grew up in a suburb outside of Chicago with his sister who is 2 years his junior. His mother is a Mexican immigrant born in Michoacan, Mexico and has resided in the United States for 20+ years. His mother attained a high school education in Mexico and currently works as a line worker at a factory for a large company. She has limited English fluency. His father is also a Mexican immigrant born in Michoacan, Mexico and has resided in the United States for 20+ years. His father began his first year of college majoring in engineering in Mexico but ended up leaving after one year for “personal reasons.” Currently his father works as a supervisor at a factory. He has some fluency in English. At the time of the interview, Cesar reported an average family income of $85,000 for a family of 4. His parents have been married for 20 years.

Cesar’s family currently lives in a predominately White suburb of Chicago. Its population is 15.5% Latino and has a median income of about $58,000. Additionally, the crime rate index for this neighborhood (41) is less than half the national average (100). Cesar reported that he always felt safe in his neighborhood and shared that he felt lucky to live where he did. He stated that his parents worked very hard to move the family from a small apartment in the city to their own home in the suburbs. He shared that he is very appreciative of their sacrifice because they were able to provide him and his sister with a comfortable and safe living environment. However, he states that his parents have limited friends in the neighborhood and thus limited social support. It is not clear if this is a result of language barriers and/or socioeconomic differences between Cesar’s parents and their neighbors.
Cesar went to his local elementary school and middle school, which he describes as predominately White. He attended bilingual classes until second grade. He is fluent in Spanish and English. Cesar attended the local public high school. This school is ranked 23 amongst all the high schools in Illinois, ranked number one in the nation for ACT improvement, and has a graduation rate of over 97%. Cesar shared that his school is a great school and that it adequately prepared him for college. He also shared that he was actively involved in a number of opportunities throughout his four years of high school – including a variety of AP courses, the National Honors Society, the soccer and track teams, ACT practice courses, and career related activities. Additionally, he reported that while he worked independently and took initiative to prepare himself for college, he appreciated the assistance he received from his teachers and counselors when he needed it and their willingness to help. Lastly, he shared that in his school he was surrounded by like-minded peers who were equally motivated to succeed in school and pursue a college degree, and who were committed to staying away from “bad influences” such as drugs and alcohol. He reported that all of his high school friends went to on college, including a close friend who is currently his roommate at the U of I. Cesar graduated with a cumulative GPA of 5.4 on a 5.0 scale. He was confident that he was well-qualified and prepared for the U of I, so he only applied to this university sure that he would be admitted. He entered the U of I with 20 college credits.

With regards to his parents, Cesar did not state that they were a big influence in his academic success. He believes that he is in college because of his own motivation and hard work, and the opportunities his school provided. However, he also shared that his parents “provided the foundation” for him to do well. For example, he recalled that his mother consistently worked on math problems with him when he was in grade school, and that she would quiz him on the multiplication table. In retrospect, he feels that this has indirectly influenced his decision to pursue engineering in college because of his advanced math skills. Additionally, Cesar shared that his parents’ confidence in him also motivated him to do well in school. Specifically, he reported that his parents expected him to do well in school and once they saw that he was consistently doing so, they trusted his judgment and his decisions. Consequently, Cesar reported that he (unlike many of his peers) was seldom supervised or monitored to ensure that he was doing his homework, studying for exams, or even completing his college applications. Cesar shared that both of his parents provide him with support and let him know that they are very proud of him. He is especially close with his mother, whom he communicates with on a daily basis. His parents also encourage him to guide his younger sister and help her achieve what he has. Thus, Cesar feels a sense of responsibility to make sure that his sister is on the right path towards higher education, but sometimes becomes frustrated when he sees his efforts overlooked or unappreciated by his sister. Cesar also gives credit to his parents for instilling in him moral values and for teaching him about God. He reported that he has a strong Catholic faith, and that he and his parents try to lead their lives in a way that is reflective of their spiritual beliefs. Cesar shared that his faith grew stronger when his parents successfully overcame a rough time in their marriage with the help of their church.

Overall, Cesar is a motivated, hardworking, and spiritually grounded young man. He reported that he values his education and plans to continue to take advantage of all the opportunities that come his way. He shared that he wants to make sure that he does well in college so that he can get a good paying job to support himself and his present and future family. He reported that he is
optimistic about his future and his ability to successfully overcome the challenges that lie ahead. He shared that his parents have high expectations of him, but that his expectations for himself are greater. At the time of the interview, Cesar had not declared a major area of study but shared that he intends on majoring in engineering because of his interest in math and physics.

Luke

Luke is an 18 year-old Mexican male who was born and raised in Chicago with his twin brother and a brother 5 years his junior. Both of his parents were born in Mexico but they migrated to the United States at a very young age. His father is from Vera Cruz and his mother is from Juana Juarta. His mother finished high school in the US and his father was able to obtain some college credits during his service in the Marine Corps, which he joined at the age of 17 after dropping out of high school. After completing his term in the marines, his father worked for a Japanese company but ended up leaving once the company decided to leave the states. He has been in and out of different jobs, which Luke believes is due to lack of motivation. He is currently in search of employment. Luke’s mother has had to be the primary financial provider for their family since his father is out of work. She currently works as a licensing technician, which Luke described as someone who reviews the licenses that large companies apply for. At the time of the interview, Luke reported an average family income of $70,000 for a family of 5. His parents have been married for 20 years.

Luke’s family currently lives in a predominantly Latino area located on the southwest side of Chicago. Its population is 84% Latino and has a median income of $37,400 with an average family size of 3.8. Luke described it as a fairly poor neighborhood with a lot of open gang activity on street corners and in public areas. His family has to enter through their alley rather than in the front due to the threat of shootings and the “crack house” that is next door. Aware of the dangers in their neighborhood, Luke’s parents were determined to get their children away from the gangs and other neighborhoods influences so that they could excel in their studies.

Luke shared that his mother and father were both very involved in his and his twin brother’s early education. His mother would read to them every night and always stressed that succeeding in school is their only job. His father has a passion for reading and he regularly shared details of the latest book he was reading with his children. He would also take them to museums, renaissance fairs, and other outings in order to show them that the world is so diverse and there is a lot to experience. He always encouraged them to think big and beyond their current limitations. However, Luke reported that his mother was the greatest influence on his education because she worked really hard to support their studies and made whatever sacrifices she needed to so that her children had the opportunities she never had.

Luke attended preschool to 8th grade at a neighborhood elementary school. He described his grade school as “normal” with enthusiastic and caring teachers. However, as he got older, he noticed the deficits in the school, including the lack of motivation by many students and the strong presence of gangs. He doesn’t know if the school actually changed for the worse or if he just became more aware of these issues. At times, school was stressful for Luke but his involvement in an achievement program on the north side of Chicago, a program his older cousin participated in the year before, helped prepare him for both high school and college coursework.
Beginning in 5th grade, Luke would spend his evenings in after school meetings with a one-on-one tutor and participating in a sports program. He also went on field trips that helped expand his knowledge of the community. He would fill out a weekly goal sheet that helped him track his assignments and plan his weeks in advance. These skills have helped him a great deal and he was able to secure some scholarships from his participation in the program.

For high school, both Luke and his twin brother attended a private faith-based boarding school in Wisconsin that they attended year round. This is the school that his older cousin attended, and thus Luke’s mother learned from her sister about the benefits of the school and how to seek financial aid. As a result, Luke and his brother attended this school for only 5% of the total tuition. Although the cost was significant to his parents, Luke shared that this cost was worth it for his mother because she wanted them to get away from the neighborhood and focus solely on their studies. Luke describes his high school as diverse and accepting and that he and his brother were fortunate to have a variety of friends. However, he also shared that there was a significant class divide between the wealthy students (whose parents owned fortune 500 companies, for example) and the low-income students (most of who came from disfranchised neighborhoods in Chicago). Luke shared that his mother worked very hard and often sacrificed buying things for herself so that her children had what they needed for school and didn’t feel deprived or less than the other wealthy children.

In high school, Luke was challenged academically as well as spiritually. He shared that he had religious classes, three scheduled prayer times each day, and three weekly church services. There was also a big focus on volunteering and developing character outside of just academics. He states that in high school, he tried everything. With regard to teachers and school staff, Luke reported that his teachers had a huge impact on him. Specifically, he shared that his teachers encouraged him and created an atmosphere where all students felt valued. He also shared that his teachers felt more like friends that he could confide in rather than strict adults that didn’t understand his point of view. In general, he shared that he and his brother were surrounded by positive influences at this school and that the question of whether one was going to college or not was not even an issue. The question was, “which university am I going to?” While a few students in his graduating class postponed college, Luke shared that this was not a matter of preparation or desire, but simply a matter of finances. Luke graduated with a 3.4 GPA on a 4.0 scale. He entered the University of Illinois with 10 college credits.

Luke reported that he is very close with his twin brother who attends a public university about 200 miles away from the U of I. Luke shared throughout the interviews that he has a very strong relationship with his twin brother and that attending separate universities was difficult for both of them to get used to. He considers his twin brother his main support and reported that he talks to him regularly. Throughout his childhood and his high school years, Luke and his twin brother shared many of the same experiences but through every crisis, they are each other’s main confidant. Additionally, Luke also considers his maternal older cousin, a senior at the same university his twin brother attends, to be his third brother. He shared that his cousin has always been an inspiration to Luke and his twin brother, and that he “paved” the way for them by showing them what they needed to do to prepare themselves for college (for example, the achievement program they attended in Chicago).
One of the main challenges that Luke and his twin brother faced while away at high school, was dealing with family problems from a distance. Namely, Luke shared that his mother would call to talk about his father’s infidelity and sometimes about financial issues. His mother never asked them to go back home, but she relied on Luke for emotional support. Both Luke and his brother dealt with issues of depression, sadness, and self-esteem during high school but they were able to support each other. At the time of the interview, Luke shared that his major is Economics, and that he works as a blogger for the admissions office and in the dining hall on campus. After college, he plans on going to graduate school to continue his education in Economics, Political Science, or Law. His long-term goal is to develop his own non-profit organization that caters to the various social justice needs of residents in marginalized neighborhoods.

Adrian

Adrian is a 19 year-old Mexican-American male who was born and raised in the United States. His father and mother are both Mexican immigrants. His mother speaks fluent English, graduated from high school, and attended some college. She has a busing job at the grade school that Adrian attended so she always knew what was going on in his education. His father came to the US at the age of 18 and moved from Arizona to Chicago. He obtained his GED in the United States at the age of 47. Adrian has one sister who is 12 years old. He shared that he is not as close to her as he would like to be because of the age and gender difference. At the time of the interview, Adrian reported that his family income is $30,000 for a family of 4. His parents have been married for 20 years.

Adrian was born in a neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, which is one of its most highly Latino populated (77%) communities, and has a median income of $36,245. When Adrian was 4, his parents moved to another south side neighborhood. Its population is made up of 52% Latino, primarily of Mexican descent, and has a median income of $47,017. He saw the move as a definite benefit as he remembers hearing gun shots and seeing burning cars on the streets surrounding his old home. He describes his current neighborhood as “filled with stupidity” as he doesn’t understand what goes through the heads of some of his surrounding neighbors. When his family first moved in, he shared that there was a suburban feeling with a certain sense of tranquility. But after a large migration of Mexican immigrants, Adrian saw the atmosphere change to “chaos and violence” that made him feel like he was living in the “ghetto”. He used the criminal acts that he witnessed as motivation to turn away from violence and work hard enough to be able to afford more for himself and for his current and future family.

Adrian attended both Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. He grew up speaking Spanish but learned English in first grade. He attended a Catholic grade school where his mother was very involved and both parents made sacrifices to afford. His neighborhood school was not an option because of the high gang activity, pregnancy, and law enforcement that surrounds the campus. He perceived that it did not produce many successful students aside from a few individuals (like his female cousin who is about to graduate from a four-year university). After taking a pre-SAT exam in sixth grade at a college preparatory school, he told himself, “I’m coming here for high school.” This was, in fact, the high school that he attended. He commuted four hours a day but he felt it was worth it because this high school (which is ranked 6 amongst all of the high schools in Illinois) offered him many opportunities. For example, he was part of a small group of students
and faculty members that would help him prepare his applications and provided mentoring for education. He also played on both the soccer and baseball teams on top of balancing four years of honors and AP courses in subjects like Physics and History. He entered the U of I with 11 college credits.

Adrian had a very different relationship with his mother and father. He feels that the impression his parents have tried to leave with him is that his focus should be on getting a good career so that he won’t have to live through the same struggles that they had to. His father has always been very supportive and was always there for him especially when it came to sports. He would take him to practice and spend time during the evenings working with Adrian on athletics or taking him where he needed to go. They established a form of mutual respect where his father would make a lot of sacrifices for his son and Adrian in return would do small tasks that his father asked him to do. On the other hand, his mother always questioned whether or not he would graduate. She used “tough love” to push him and make him want to succeed or go against the odds. When he was accepted to U of I, she didn’t want him to go away for school but now she is very proud and supportive. She would always tell him to do his homework and made sure his work was perfect in his early school years. Adrian felt that his parents expected him to do well in primary and secondary school so that he would go to college. Overall, he expressed that his can rely on his parents for support and encouragement, regardless of the circumstances.

Adrian shared that he is very proud of his ethnicity and background, but that his identity has been a constant struggle in his life as he embraces both his Mexican and American cultures. One story that really shaped his identity occurred during his sophomore year of high school. Adrian described his physical appearance at the time as that of a “gang banger” – wearing a “do rag”, baggy pants, and baggy shirts – because he never learned otherwise. One day he was on his way to his youth group with some of his friends and was suddenly approached by a police car. One of the officers grabbed him and threw him into the hood of the car and questioned where he was going and making assumptions of his motive. After an hour of questioning, he was finally released but not without a warning. Adrian felt he was judged based on his appearance. Looking back, he felt that he has learned that physical appearance is not a deciding factor and that whatever he feels comfortable in is the best for him. Rather than struggling to choose one identifying culture, Adrian has embraced both his Mexican and American attributes which he believes has made him that much more diverse and able to relate to a majority of individuals and environments. He also shared that the Latina/o Studies courses that he took during his first semester as the U of I, made him aware of the achievements that Latinos have been able to acquire over the past century. He expressed some anger about not being exposed to this knowledge before college and shared that if Mexican History was taught in high school, more students would be inspired to do well in school rather than thinking that all Latina/os are uneducated and powerless, like the media portrays.

Some other influences that affected Adrian’s college decisions and ambitions were his uncle who attained a Ph.D in History from the U of I, as well as one of his cousins who graduated from this university. Adrian recalled an instance during a family party, where he sat down with his uncle and began to discuss his plans to attend college. His uncle helped him go over the pros and cons of different universities and encouraged him to apply to Illinois. Adrian has always felt very independent in his studies especially in high school. Adrian believed that his parents’ strict
discipline in high school and grade school have helped him avoid bad influences and stay on the right track. Aside from family influences, his girlfriend of three years has provided a great deal of support for Adrian as he pursues his academic goals away from home. He stated that his connection with his girlfriend has given him the closeness that he did not always feel from his mother or father. Currently, Adrian is focused on transferring into the Accounting program and is an active member of a pre-professional Latino club for Business majors at the University of Illinois. He also just joined a social fraternity where he has made a great deal of new friends and mentors to add to his college experience.

Abraham

Abraham is a 19 year-old Mexican male who was born and raised on the Southside of Chicago. Abraham is the youngest of five siblings with 2 older brothers (28 and 32 years of age) and 2 older sisters (27 and 33 years of age). Two of his siblings obtained their associate’s degrees from a community college but Abraham is the first in his family to attend a 4-year university. His mother is a Mexican immigrant born in Guanajuato, Mexico, who is primarily a stay-at-home mother, but occasionally works as a housekeeper. She came to the United States at the age of four, completed grammar school, and then completed her sophomore year of high school before having to drop out due to pregnancy. His father is also a Mexican immigrant from Guanajuato, Mexico, who works as a butcher at a steakhouse in Chicago. He completed sixth grade in Mexico and did not pursue further education when he immigrated to the United States due to a demanding work schedule. Although Abraham’s mother is fluent in English, they predominantly speak Spanish with his father who has not learned English. At the time of the interview, Abraham reported a family income of $31,000 for a family of 4. His parents have been married for 34 years.

Abraham describes his neighborhood as predominantly low-income with a lot of gang activity. Over half (53%) of the residents of his neighborhood are Latino (predominantly of Mexican descent) and the median family income is $25,705. The average family size is 3.21. The crime rate for this neighborhood is twice the national average. Abraham shared that he and his siblings would see people dealing drugs and that they would often hear gun shots while playing in the backyard. Despite these circumstances, he said the gangs and violence did not affect him. He shared that he tried to block them out and not let them influence him because he knew he did not want to be like “those people”. Interestingly, because Abraham has four older siblings, three of whom were involved with gangs, his family had a sense of immunity. Everyone in the neighborhood knew not to bother him or his family because of their reputation and acquaintances. Abraham shared that there is a high unemployment rate in his neighborhood and that children are exposed at an early age to the crime, drugs, alcohol, and other social ills of the neighborhood.

Abraham began his schooling in kindergarten at the local neighborhood elementary school. It is a predominantly Latino school where both students and professors are Mexican and Puerto Rican. He felt that this was comforting but also had a negative impact on his childhood because he was not exposed to other races and ethnicities while growing up. Abraham shared that he was somewhat of a troublemaker during his early school years. He began to focus more on his studies when he was in fifth grade and realized that doing good in school was important for his future.
He shared that after this turning point, he became the “nerd of the family” because he loved to go to school (and still does). Abraham applied and was admitted to a selective high school on the North side of Chicago, but realized after a few days that the 2-hour commute each way was too much for him. As a result, he switched to his neighborhood high school (ranked 652 out of 667 in Illinois) which he described as a typical metal detector school with fights, drugs, and gang activity every day. He also reported that the school is on academic probation due to low test scores and lack of funding.

Despite the lack of resources at his high school, Abraham shared that he had the support of his teachers and his guidance counselor, who helped him get through his assignments and college applications. A particularly instrumental mentor was his Law professor who introduced him to an academy for students interested in Law during his freshman year. He applied and was admitted to this program, and continued to take courses pertaining to Law each year. Abraham shared that he enjoyed the classes and the professors who taught them (one of whom was a female attorney who took a special interest in him). During his senior year he completed a paid internship in Chicago which connected him with professionals in the field and inspired him to choose a Pre-Law track at the University of Illinois. He was in honors and AP classes all four years of high school and graduated with 4.6 GPA on a 4.0 scale. He was also the president of Student Council, and a member of the National Honors Society and other academic clubs. He entered the U of I with 3 college credits. Overall, Abraham noted that his high school had a lot of great opportunities for students, but that the gangs and violence overshadowed those opportunities for the majority of the students. He also shared that while most of his friends did not prioritize their studies, they nevertheless supported Abraham and expressed feeling proud of him. He shared that they would tease him once in a while, but that overall his friends respected his commitment to school. In this way, Abraham is one of few students who were effectively able to navigate being friends with “street kids” as well as with “school kids.” In his own words, he was one of the few “cool nerds.”

Abraham shared that his parents have been a significant positive influence in his life, particularly in regards to his academics. He shared that – while they could not help him directly with his school assignments – they always emphasized the importance of education and they did whatever they could to support him in his educational goals (including not letting him know about family problems so that he would not be distracted). Additionally, Abraham shared that witnessing how hard his parents worked and the sacrifices they made on a daily basis motivated him to focus on his studies so that he can provide them and his future family with a better life. He also shared that his Catholic faith – which was instilled in him by his mother – is a prime motivator to succeed in life as he feels that his reliance on God has helped him stay focused and appreciate the abilities that he has been blessed with. Interestingly, one of the people in Abraham’s life that has had the greatest impact on his academic and personal career is his oldest brother, the “black sheep” of the family. Specifically, Abraham shared that he uses his 32 year-old brother – who dropped out of high school, has struggled with drug addictions, and has spent his life in and out of jail – as a motivator of what not to do. In this way, his brother’s mistakes have been beneficial in showing him the real life consequences of gangs, drugs, and violence.

Abraham set his mind on the U of I after getting a “you belong here vibe” during a tour his sophomore year of high school. He feels that his adaptation to college life has been eased with
the help of the Latino cultural center on campus and also his fraternity. In terms of his future goals, Abraham is determined to pursue a career in law, a goal that he has had since his freshman year of high school. He is very proactive in seeking the advice of his mentors in Chicago, as well as making new connections at the U of I. Overall, he is proud of his academic accomplishments to date, and confident in his ability to successfully complete college and graduate studies. He is also determined to “succeed in life” so that he can take care of his current and future family.

Danny

Danny is a 19 year-old male who was born in Peru and migrated to the United States with his family at the age of 5, after his parents waited 12 years to attain approval to immigrate to the United States. Danny and his family relied on extended family members for housing, food, and other forms of assistance until his parents found steady employment. Danny’s father worked as an engineer in Peru. Although his English-language proficiency is limited, he attained the necessary qualifications to become a high school math teacher, a job he held for 7 years before moving on to his current career in sales. Danny’s mother received her master’s degree as a psychologist in Peru but now is a homemaker, with a few temporary part-time jobs on the side. She has never mastered the English language, which might have stopped her from having a professional career in the US. Danny is the youngest child and has two older brothers (10 and 12 years his senior) that both graduated from a four-year university with majors in Economics and Computer Science. At the time of the interview, Danny reported that his family income is approximately $30,000 for a family of 5. His parents have been married 26 years.

Danny’s permanent residence is in a neighborhood located in the North side of Chicago. Approximately 25.5% of the population in this neighborhood is Latino, and the median income is $47,905. Additionally, the crime rate index for this neighborhood is about three times the national average. Danny describes the neighborhood as “good and friendly.” He shared that it was safe enough that he could play outside with the neighbors and organized enough to have block parties. He also shared that everyone got along and that his block in particular was very close-knit. However, Danny mentioned that there were gangs by his neighborhood high school, which he did not attend because he was admitted to a selective college prep high school. Consequently, Danny was not frequently exposed to the gangs and neighborhood violence frequently discussed by other participants in this study.

Danny attended Pre-Kindergarten in Peru. When he arrived in the US, he was enrolled in bilingual classes where he learned in both Spanish and English. From Kindergarten to 3rd grade Danny attended Haugen Elementary School until his mother transferred him to Brentano Math and Science Academy because she heard from her friends that it was a better school. For high school, Danny attended Lane Technical High School, a selective enrollment magnet school that is ranked 6 amongst all of the high schools in Illinois. Danny graduated school with a 3.8 GPA on a 4 point scale. He took a number of AP courses in high school and as a result, entered the U of I with 14 college credits in Spanish and Macroeconomics. He also came in as an I-Leap Scholar, a mentoring program for incoming freshman that offers one-on-one tutoring, counseling, leadership training, and academic assistance to increase the success of U of I students. In terms of extracurricular activities in high school, Danny played soccer and joined a dance club. He shared that he has always been proactive in terms of seeking opportunities to get
involved, as well as help when he needs it. This is something that he continues to do in college. For example, at the time of the interview, he reported that he was part of a dance group at the U of I, that he worked at mental/physical health center on campus, and that he regularly meets with his advisors to go over his semester plans and career goals.

Danny shared that he has always had a very positive and supportive relationship with both of his parents, whom have always encouraged him and who frequently communicated to him the value of education. He shared that he has a deep appreciation and respect for his parents’ courage in leaving Peru to find better opportunities for their children in the United States. His father, being a high school teacher, helped him a great deal in choosing the best high school with the best academic environment. He wanted his son to be in at an institution that valued education and would encourage Danny to apply himself. His dad was very proud when he was accepted to his competitive high school. Danny shared that his brothers (one who completed high school in Peru and the other graduated from the neighborhood high school) were also inspirational and that he looked up to them. However, he shared that they did not provide much guidance for him in terms of navigating high school and college, but simply modeled for him that college was the next logical step after high school.

Overall, Danny expressed being very satisfied with his life and the academic achievements that he has made thus far. He also shared that he is very proud of his Peruvian heritage, and that he visits his family and friends in Peru every year or every other year, depending on the family finances. He reported that he maintains frequent contact with his friends in Peru, which reminds him of how lucky he is to live in the U.S. because of all the opportunities that he has in this country. In Chicago, he enjoys the common importance of family in the lives of his Mexican friends and has been able to continue the Peruvian culture and traditions that he learned so long ago. Danny is also very proud of his achievements and performance thus far and is excited for the next few years. His volunteer work at a hospital in Chicago the summer before his freshman year of college and his relationship with his sister-in-law who is a nurse has inspired his love for Physical Therapy. He hopes to attend graduate school for Physical Therapy and is currently working as a volunteer in order to get the experience needed for a graduate degree. He works one-on-one with a student that has cerebral palsy doing workouts, spotting him, and setting up his equipment. He is confident that a career in PT will give him the opportunity to help others, do something positive with his life, and have a well-paying job that he enjoys.