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Reframing College:

Mexican American Students,
Higher Education and
Family Restorative Justice





This qualitative study examines the impact of an early college program that prepares Mexican American¹ first-generation, college-going students for success in higher education. It investigates how participants reframe the meaning of college and how this, combined with validation of their ethnic scholarly identity, contributes to their persistence in pursuing higher education. Participants share their experiences with early college opportunities, supported by family engagement, which played a pivotal role in nurturing their academic aspirations. Key findings reveal a holistic redefinition of college attainment, rooted in reverence for familial and ancestral sacrifices. Education is not merely seen as an individual accomplishment but also as a way to honor heritage, inspire future generations and enrich communities. This redefined perspective on obtaining a college degree serves as a powerful motivator for students to overcome life challenges and ultimately attain their academic goals. The report concludes with actionable recommendations for both educational institutions and students, aimed at fostering empowerment and providing necessary resources for success in higher education.

¹ This report primarily focuses on those of Latin descent. When referring to the participants, I will use their identified preferred term, Mexican American. When referring to scholarly work, I will honor the terms used in the literature, such as Latinx or Latino/a. Government entities and reports use the term Hispanic. Varying terms will be used interchangeably.

As a state director overseeing federal after-school and summer school funding, I visited more than a hundred K-12 schools across Arizona to identify best practices in action. During one observation, I witnessed a junior high school that not only provided interventions for struggling learners but also offered gifted learners opportunities to enroll in college courses after school. I was impressed by the vibrant energy of 12 and 13-year-old Mexican American students making their way to their college-level math courses. The hallways were adorned with striking college banners, many of them Ivy League institutions, symbolizing former students who had gone on to attend or graduate from these prestigious institutions. Inside the classroom, students were enthusiastic about peer teaching, and their efforts were met with applause as they explained their approach to math problems. Students at Southwest Junior High were immersed in an environment fostering a college-going climate, challenging two prevalent misconceptions and biases such as the mistaken belief that students of color are not suited for college and that public schools in low-income communities cannot cultivate a college-bound culture.

Some researchers argue that the disparity in advanced learning opportunities is due to a leadership mindset that mistakenly believes Latinx and other minoritized students are not college material (Leo & Wilcox, 2023; Huber, 2011; Moll et al., 2001; Espino et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005, 2013) and will not succeed in rigorous courses (Fink, 2023; Santiago & Callen, 2010; Ford & Grantham, 2003). In this report, successful Mexican American college graduates share their thoughts on preparation and persistence. The following questions served as focal points for eliciting participants' insights into their college experiences, yielding meaningful findings for this report:

1. What college academic preparations had a significant impact on you, and why?
2. When faced with challenges in your educational journey, what factors enabled you to persevere?

The rich qualitative data that emerged underscored the profound impact of early exposure to college experiences in junior high. The emphasis on mathematical rigor sparked interest in pursuing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) degrees. Outreach to families made summer opportunities feasible by providing support for scholarships and transportation. Once beginning their full-time college experience on various campuses, participants in this study elaborated on the significance of navigating culture shock by seeking out peers, clubs, and cultural centers that validated their sense of belonging within academia. When faced with the prospect of dropping out, they persevered by recalling their intrinsic motivation for attending college, which transcended mere job prospects. Instead, for these participants, college represented a more holistic approach including a harmonious life balance, a platform for professional activism, a role model for others, and a way to honor familial sacrifices.

Hearing about what worked from successful Latinx scholars is critical as the U.S.' largest ethnic majority (U.S. Census, 2023) continues to face disparities in academic achievement, especially in higher education. For example, 2020-2021 National Center for Education Statistics data indicate that 16% of Hispanic students earned a bachelor's degree compared to 59.7% of White students, with a widening disparity the more advanced the degree (NCES, 2020). In order to better understand this disparity, it is important to look at the literature on access to pre-college rigorous learning opportunities for Latinx students, including Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs. Since the students in this study were interested in STEM careers, it is also critical to cite the growing body of research about students of color and STEM degrees.

Access to Pre-College Rigorous Learning Opportunities

One barrier to degree attainment is limited access to high-quality, rigorous learning opportunities at the pre-college level (Crisp et al., 2015; Au, 2016; Solórzano et al., 2005). Gifted and talented education services in middle and high school can be one avenue to gain this access. According to national data from the U.S. Department of Education, only 6% of all public school students are enrolled in gifted programs. However, there are significant concerns regarding equitable representation among racial groups in the assessment process for these programs, as well as issues about the quality of programming (Rinn et al., 2022). Scholars bring forth “evidence of discriminatory practices/policies...towards Latinx students attending Title I schools (Gray & Gentry, 2023, p. 15)” and estimate that nationally “between 53% and 66% of Latinx youth (Gray & Gentry, 2023, p. 7)” are under-identified as gifted. This exclusion adversely impacts Latinx students with a high potential for advanced learning opportunities (Dreilinger, 2020; Gray & Gentry, 2023).



Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs

One example of a rigorous learning opportunity is dual enrollment. Although not exclusively for gifted students, advanced learners are targeted. Dual enrollment is a blanket term that refers to a wide range of college course offerings, generally on a high school campus. It can refer to a single course or a comprehensive early college program where students earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree (Fink, 2023). According to the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (2017), positive outcomes for dual enrollment students include improved high school completion, college attainment, and college persistence. Early college high schools have the potential to narrow racial and ethnic gaps in postsecondary outcomes (AIR, 2020; Britton et al., 2020). Varying reasons include reducing the price and time to degree attainment, additional academic and social support, and outreach services that help students and families understand the college application process. Early college programs broaden access and offer extended support (Fink, 2023).

As the number of Latinx students grows in school systems, qualitative stories from junior high students who participated in early college programs, including taking college coursework as 12 and 13-year-olds, who are now college graduates, provide insight into how early college experiences helped prepare and persist to college graduation. While existing research on the effectiveness of early college high schools exists (Jett & Rinn, 2020), this qualitative study adds insights to the literature from participants of a program in junior high school. By delving into the experiences of these scholars, the study unveils the nuances of factors that prepared them for success and motivated them to persist until graduation.

Minority Students and STEM Education

The school highlighted in this study heavily focuses on rigorous mathematics. Researchers have identified mathematics as a barrier, and rigor as the antidote to attaining STEM degrees (Crisp et al., 2015; Vagi et al., 2018). Tyson et al. show "that minority students who are prepared for STEM degree attainment undertake high-level science and mathematics courses, particularly calculus...are more likely to persist through STEM coursework in college than their White counterparts and obtain a STEM degree" (Tyson et al., 2007, p. 243).

Each participant² in this study attended the same predominately Latinx (96%) junior high school, characterized by a college-going climate with advanced learning opportunities especially in mathematics, implemented by teachers and staff who engage families. The scholars eligible for inclusion in this study were individuals who had previously attended Southwest Junior High (SJH) and were either currently enrolled in college or had graduated from college. A call for participants flyer was distributed on the SJH Early College website, emphasizing the study’s objective to explore the experiences of former students and examine how these experiences contributed to their college preparation. Ten participants responded. At the time of this study, three were career professionals, and the remaining seven participants were in an undergraduate or graduate program. To date, all ten are college graduates—three with graduate degrees. While all participants initially pursued STEM majors, two eventually discovered different passions: one in law and the other in academia, aspiring to become a professor. Still, eight of the ten participants were in STEM-related health and engineering disciplines. All identified as first-generation college-going Mexican Americans.

SJH is in Gadsden Elementary School District #32 (GESD), which includes one preschool, six elementary schools, and a junior high school and middle school. In 2019–2020, 5036 students enrolled, with 99.66% identifying as Hispanic (ADE, 2021). The district is located along the border of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico (see Figure 1), and 97% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Eleven hundred students are migratory (Chavez & Chavez, 2019). Half of the participants in this study were children of agricultural laborers.

Figure 1. Map of San Luis, Arizona



² Participants will also be referred to as San Luis scholars, scholars, and graduates interchangeably.

This study examines *testimonios* from Mexican American college graduates, highlighting the support structures that prepared and encouraged higher education aspiration and degree attainment. Testimonio methodology is a form of oral storytelling that embraces social transformation and highlights the individual's ability to overcome challenges while building solidarity and resistance to dominant cultural norms (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

This research occurred during the COVID-19 national lockdown. Amid the unease stirred by the pandemic, alongside a deep concern for those afflicted, I became increasingly grateful for the resilience and communal wisdom embedded within Indigenous (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) and Chicana Feminist methodologies (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2012, 2016, 2020). These methodologies, which cherish cultural practices of community engagement and mutual learning, became a beacon of hope. Employing *pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), *testimonios* (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012), and *convivencia* (Delgado Bernal, 2020) not only served as methodological anchors but also as cultural bridges, enabling both myself and fellow scholars to weave a tapestry of camaraderie. Through the virtual conduits of the Zoom platform, we transcended physical isolation, crafting a space that was culturally resonant and emotionally sustaining. This experience underscored the profound capacity of these methodologies to facilitate community building in virtual realms, reimagining the boundaries of connectivity, and belonging in times of crisis.

The research tools generate trust, and *convivencia* breaks the power dynamic and hierarchy between research and participants (Delgado Bernal, 2020). Galván (2011) offers *convivencia* to reach a level of “true connection” (p.554) and “collectivism” (p. 555) through coexistence, sharing, and learning. It is an anti-colonial (Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2012) way to break researcher and participant boundaries in a shared community. In practice, this means paying acute attention to connecting as people showing authentic concern and care and not simply extracting data for research. That climate created by seeing participants holistically offers an environment of reciprocal learning and sharing (Delgado Bernal, 2020).

In many Latinx cultures, *pláticas* are experienced as intimate conversations in which stories unfold, advice is shared, and concerns are aired (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Latinx researchers use *pláticas* in an academic context to help facilitate deeply engaging and fruitful discussions during data collection (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Using *pláticas* and *testimonios*, I learned what influences supported college preparation for San Luis scholars. The methods allowed me to share enough about my educational journey as a non-traditional, first-generation college-going student to create a safe space, breaking any preconceived notions that I was not to be trusted as someone very different from their background. I shared honest aspects of my college journey, trying to be more approachable than if I were conducting a structured interview or focus group (Galván, 2011).

This research draws from twenty-three hours of pláticas and testimonio data from the ten participants. Zoom transcribed the audio in the video pláticas. I analyzed the data in the video, audio, and notes, categorizing by theme. Themes were compared across participant pláticas. Because saturation relies on the study's scope, participants recruited, research questions, and framework (Baker & Edwards, 2012), I relied on cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2016), determining that if at least six participants shared a theme, it was a finding. Cultural intuition validates insight from four sources: personal experiences, existing literature, professional experience, and analytical processes (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2016). Cultural intuition, combined with testimonio and reflexión (reflection), a process of analyzing in partnership (Espino et al., 2012), guided exposure to the complexities of educational journeys through a multi-phase analysis. In practice, this meant that during pláticas sessions, participants were encouraged to probe, validate, or ask additional questions so that the knowledge created became richer with reflection. As a researcher, my cultural intuition allowed me to utilize knowledge and senses to stay on a topic or allow the pláticas to head in a different direction.

Positionality

As a researcher, I identify as female, American-born of Mexican descent, cis-gendered and mid-aged. My phenotype displays some Eurocentric features (Telles, 2014) that offer privilege afforded to the dominant white society. My educational journey included the privilege of private education and parental support. I also experienced hardship during the challenge of earning three degrees while raising children and working full-time as a non-traditional student. More subjective in my positionality (Holmes, 2020) is my field experience, which spans three decades of working in the Arizona educational system. During my tenure at the elementary school, I served as a community and family liaison. Subsequently, at the district level, I assumed responsibility for overseeing local and federal grant initiatives. Transitioning to the state department of education, I spearheaded the establishment and management of a department tasked with distributing a \$24M federal grant annually through a competitive process. This grant aimed at implementing afterschool and summer school services. Within the university system, I specialized as a grant writer, with a particular focus on opportunities tailored for Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Currently, I serve as the Director of our university's first Title V Developing HSI grant, where I oversee the strategic direction and execution of grant-related endeavors. My career trajectory reflects a deliberate and dedicated commitment to education, driven by its transformative impact on my family's path.

The collected data shed light on how Mexican American scholars prepared for and persisted in higher education, emerging as successful first-generation college students. When scholars were asked about their college preparedness, several themes emerged:

1. The significance of early access and advanced learning opportunities, particularly in mathematics.
2. Family engagement, facilitated by equity-minded staff members who cultivated partnerships with families and actively nurtured college aspirations, served as a cornerstone in preparing the participants for college.

Furthermore, insights gleaned from pláticas and testimonios data revealed a holistic reframing of the significance of college attainment. This reframing included a recognition of the sacrifices made by ancestors and family members in the pursuit of education, as well as the importance of having one's ethnic identity validated in academia through the support of peer groups and clubs. These findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of college preparation and persistence among Mexican American scholars.

Early College Access

SJH leverages gifted and after school/summer school resources to provide access to early college experiences. A partnership with the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY) means junior high students spend summers earning college credit while being immersed at a university and exposed to higher education networks. The on-campus summer programs mean students choose a course, travel to the higher institution, stay on campus in a dormitory, take the course, and earn credit over a few weeks. One student participated every summer in a CTY experience for four years. He was exposed to courses that influenced his aspirations. He said,

Every summer I would go to CTY, the Center for Talented Youth, lucky enough to receive scholarships every time. The first one I went to Johns Hopkins University and took the Principles of Engineering and that is where I got exposed to Biomedical engineering. Since then, I've had it on my mind. The second time I went to Seattle University and studied Philosophy...the next year I went back to Rhode Island to Johns Hopkins and studied Zoology. In the fourth year, I went to Pennsylvania to Lafayette College...I studied Mathematical Modeling. At that point, I was already learning more math but it was a different kind of math so it opened my mind to how many types of applications you can have with math than what I was learning at school.

This contributed to the Associate of Science (AS) degree he earned before his high school diploma. He began his junior year in college as an 18-year-old and two years ahead of schedule, saving time and money for his bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering.

In addition to the summer credit-bearing trips, participants shared the opportunity to take part in Arizona Western College (AWC) course offerings. AWC has a branch adjacent to the local high school, with the main campus thirty minutes away. Participants took courses outside the school day at a low or no-cost rate. The scholars knew of and

participated in the Early Education Rate for elementary–high school students of \$25/credit hour at AWC. According to the AWC website (2024), for those who cannot afford the reduced tuition, there is a local scholarship with priority for students with low-income backgrounds. Three of the ten participants earned associate degrees at AWC before transferring to a university.

College Level Mathematics

Students interviewed for this study prepared for college-level mathematics by participating in after-school and summer school math clubs, tutoring, and dual enrollment courses, ultimately earning college credits. One of the first students to participate in the early college program discussed the challenge of running out of math material by sophomore year. He said, “I did not take any mathematics junior or senior year...there was nothing for me past calculus.” His story points out the importance of the continuity of rigorous mathematics to keep up with his learning capacity. He believed he could have earned a civil engineering degree earlier with additional advanced coursework offered in high school.

One key asset at the school is an award-winning mathematics instructor, Mr. Arrizon, whom President Obama honored as a 2012 Champion of Change for Preparing Students for College Early (Arrizon, 2012). The San Luis Scholars credited Mr. Arrizon for his approach to teaching math and allowing students to peer teach when they understood elements of mathematical concepts. Students also appreciated the supplemental support and study groups offered after school to cement the lessons or get clarification. One participant did not find math her strongest subject. However, she took the study skills from SJH into her university and created peer groups to get her through the course.

Family Engagement

A significant discovery regarding college preparation highlighted the pivotal role played by compassionate staff members who actively engaged with families. As one scholar expressed, “If you don’t have good counselors, good teachers that actually care and are actually going that extra mile to get the students to college, prepare them for college, and get them thinking of college, it’s not going to happen.” Scholars further emphasized feeling valued as Mexican American students, seamlessly transitioning between English and Spanish during study groups. From their perspective, both they and their families were regarded as valuable assets within the educational setting. They felt fully supported in achieving their college aspirations, with mentors who shared their ethnic background and embraced the entirety of their identities. Through family engagement activities, staff from the school explained the logistics of early college experiences, such as the CTY summer travel and scholarship process. This support was critical to fostering students to take full advantage of early college opportunities. One participant explained the importance of family engagement, which allowed him, as a 13-year-old, to travel out of state for a summer CTY experience. He said, “There were constant meetings at the library...They wanted to talk to parents about this program and opportunities...

They would even help arrange transportation because, I mean, many parents couldn't drive to the airport." He explained that the summer programs were expensive, but the staff made the application process more accessible, introducing families to scholarship opportunities. Family support structures included parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and friends. One participant shared regarding family support:

I think that my [parents] just encouraging me a lot and giving me the reassurance helped me a lot. Especially since I'm the first one to step into college here, and it was at an early age. I have family in Seattle, which is where I went to CTY, and so my dad went to visit them while I was there...I knew that sense of comfort that I was not alone.

Despite knowing that his young son would be busy studying on campus and unable to spend time with him or the family, he still chose to make the trip, leaving a lasting impression regarding the value of education. Recognizing family members as valuable assets and educational partners was essential in ensuring that students could fully leverage their early college experiences.

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Family Restorative Justice

Restorative justice usually refers to a more just and alternative process to resolve the consequences of criminal wrongdoing or inappropriate behavior in a school setting (Latimer et al., 2005). In the context of the educational journey, I offer the term **family restorative justice** to explain how this supports persistence as students honor parental and ancestral sacrifice. This serves as the ‘finding the why’ to study motivation during challenges in the educational journey. The student restores justice to the family by holding great respect for the sacrifices it took for them to have the opportunity to achieve higher education. They begin a new realm of possibility for the family story. Family sacrifices included arduous physical work, moving for better opportunities, and the realization that members gave something up for the benefit of the children. Half of the participants were migrant students with at least one parent working in agriculture. Students commented on the strength and motivation gathered from seeing their family members’ work ethic and sacrifices. One participant’s mother offered what became a familiar saying, “*No me estoy jodiendo³ para que no estudias* (I am not fooling around so that you do not study).” The participant elaborated, “Okay, I get where you are coming from...both of my parents were busting their butts off out here in the fields for me to be able to pursue an education.” Another participant spoke about the psychological effect of seeing parents working in the fields, saying,

I do have thoughts and memories of my parents returning from the fields, really exhausted, completely beat down. I wondered, why is this the case?...and feeling impotent that I couldn’t do anything about it. Of course, I was a kid. But yeah, my mom always reminded me of how that was their job, and I shouldn’t worry about their job. They were fine. My job was to study and do well in school. I felt impotent in one aspect. I wanted to help my parents, but then my outlet for it was school because, basically, that’s all I could do.

This scholar graduated with a Juris Doctor, Magna Cum Laude with honors, and is currently working as a prosecutor. Those who mentioned grandparents spoke of their wisdom, leadership, strength, and desire to honor their lack of educational access through their degree attainment. This concept of restoring what is broken, unjust, or what was sacrificed tapped into the individual’s realization that the degree not only represented their work and sacrifices but also honored that of their families.

³ In Spanish, this word translates to “screwing.” I translate it as “fooling around.” Depending on tone and delivery it varies in harshness. The participant said it always packed a punch because of its harshness yet playfulness. When I’ve presented my work to bilingual audiences, this quote creates a lot of dialogue and is relatable among families. Therefore, I kept the quote in the piece.

College Persistence: Reframing What College Represents

Half of the participants revealed that they initially wanted to leave their higher education institution due to life circumstances, including severe parental illnesses, the death of close family members, homesickness, encounters with microaggressions⁴, and culture shock (Yosso et al., 2009; Acevedo-Gil, 2022). Descriptions varied from annoyance to anxiety and depression. Although one student transferred, she persisted and thrived at her new institution. The San Luis scholar participants had varying responses to the question regarding what supported continued study when experiencing these challenges.

Along with seeking mental health professional support, their solutions related to remembering what college meant to them. Their varied responses contribute to a holistic reframing of the college degree. For example, some scholars reported culture shock at their higher institutions. The remedy was finding peers and social groups or creating a new group that validated their ethnic identity and belonging at the institution. Six of the ten participants were part of a Latinx club or group, creating a place to find resources, learn how to navigate college, socialize, speak Spanish, and feel most at home. Scholars credited finding refuge in their group that supported their authentic selves, thus validating that they belonged in higher education. López (2010) and Wong et al. (2003) assert that a positive identity can promote resilience and higher achievement in the face of discrimination. López points out that affirmation of cultural identity is associated with a “strong, positive influence on reading and mathematics competence” (López, 2018, p. 101). The San Luis scholars emphasized the importance of finding a place on campus to be their whole selves and feel at home.

Another representation of remembering the significance of the degree was a balanced life. One participant is a professional bilingual therapist/social worker in a mental health agency offering statewide services. Now married and a mother with a postgraduate degree, she shared her goal, saying:

I want to have a stable job where I can choose my work hours or maybe become my own boss and be able to do what I can for the community, like helping kids and adults with their trauma, as well as having enough time to be with my own family with my daughter, my husband, my family, my mom, dad, sisters, and my brother.

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⁴ Microaggressions are defined as unconscious subtle indignities rooted in a person’s race, sex, or ethnicity that may occur daily and are harmful to well-being and mental health (Yosso et al., 2009).

Higher education attainment also represented an opportunity to strengthen their community and be a resource to others. Meaningful work was tied to personal stories of wanting to help a family member or seeing a problem requiring a solution. For example, seven of the ten scholars were in varying health fields of study. By offering rigorous advanced mathematics courses, SJH eliminates one obstacle commonly encountered by students pursuing STEM majors (Crisp et al., 2015; Vagi et al., 2018). One participant became a nurse when unable to help a bedridden family member as a child. He received his Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Associate Degree in Nursing (AD), and bachelor’s degree in nursing. He began his studies to become a nurse practitioner in October 2021. His goal is to earn a doctorate. He says, “As a nurse, you can only do so much, but by expanding your education, your scope of practice increases, and ultimately, the more you can help.” College attainment provided the opportunity to exercise a form of professional activism.

Cultural perpetuity was another representation of what college meant to the participants. It can be explained by responses displaying a critical awareness that their achievement was not theirs alone but shared with younger siblings, community members, and family members whom they may never meet. One participant said, “The fact that I was the only kid in the family who ever went [out of state as a 12-year-old to college] and went before me was a sense of comfort because it made me feel that I was part of something bigger...I was the first in my family to do so.” The achievement of being the first generation to earn a degree was to be shared with future generations.

Ethnic identity validation, balance, professional activism, cultural perpetuity, and family restorative justice, as shown in Figure 2, offer a holistic reframing of college attainment to the San Luis scholars. These holistic values expanded the pragmatic mainstream message that you needed college to get a job and make money.

Figure 2. The San Luis Scholars reframing of what college represents

graphic art by Lorenzo Yazzie



This report highlights Latinx academic success on two levels: academic college preparation and persistence to degree attainment. The San Luis scholars were given various advanced learning opportunities in junior high. The following recommendations may make a difference in successful Latinx scholar college preparation.

Recommendations for schools and educators include:

- ✓ Examine current Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) assessments and consider universal screening.
- ✓ Build a pathway to advanced learning through afterschool and summer school funding by offering math clubs, tutoring, chess, and extracurricular activities beginning in primary years.
- ✓ Expand advanced learning for all students willing to work hard and try.
- ✓ Provide early college experience and coursework earlier than high school, starting in middle school/junior high school, for capable students.
- ✓ Consider partnerships to expand early college experiences.
- ✓ Seek early college experiences that expand network and mentoring opportunities, including campus visits for students to learn more about career paths.
- ✓ Consider a foundation of early college mathematics coursework, such as college algebra, for capable junior high/middle schools to expand STEM majors.
- ✓ Check biases and learn about Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2013) as an element of asset-based pedagogies.
- ✓ Implement asset-based pedagogies, improving academic outcomes (López, 2018).
- ✓ Engage family members to champion the college-going culture.

Regarding the persistence to graduation, scholars noted that during life challenges, it was not the academics that had them reconsidering continued studies. It was often due to life circumstances such as ill family members, feeling homesick, or experiencing microaggressions and culture shock (Yosso et al., 2009; Acevedo-Gil, 2022). By reframing what college meant to them, they reported the realization that they were not achieving just for themselves. This reframing meant they saw college degrees with multiple benefits beyond gaining employment.

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Recommendations for Latinx students in college:

- ✓ Seek social support that validates you belong in academia.
- ✓ Understand that college can provide balance beyond having a work life.
- ✓ College attainment can support meaningful work and a form of professional activism to contribute to your community.
- ✓ Acknowledge family and ancestor sacrifice. If you do not know what these are, ask questions about them as they paved the way to your privilege to attain higher education.



This study sheds light on the qualitative narratives showcasing how SJH cultivated a college-going culture by offering advanced learning opportunities, particularly in mathematics. It underscores the significance of asset-based pedagogies in nurturing college aspirations and redefines the notion of college for successful Mexican American college graduates who call home the borderlands of Arizona. The Early College program staff embraced the totality of their identities as students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college-going, and Mexican Americans nurturing their college dreams.

This combination of advanced learning opportunities with staff who defy false narratives that students with this demographic are not college material demonstrates that this school creates a college-bound culture. The findings in this study confirm that having an equity-minded staff who sees students with assets and cultural wealth, and cultivates students' higher education aspirations is foundational to college preparation. These Mexican American graduates persisted in their studies even during life challenges by remembering what their families sacrificed on their behalf through Family Restorative Justice. Their reframing and expansion of what college degree attainment symbolizes went beyond employment. Their more holistic, nuanced understanding of college was that it would bring balance and professional activism, paying it forward by example and representing their ethnic identity through cultural perpetuity.

I have often wondered what would have happened to the participants if they had been at a typical school where only 10% of the student body is offered advanced learning opportunities. SJH currently enrolls 679 students. Instead of having 340 peers as gifted, there would have only been about sixty-seven. Would we have lost their contributions to society and wasted their talents? They are now young professionals—three engineers and five health professionals—with one participant in medical school, a lawyer, and a future Spanish professor. Graduate/Professional school is in progress for four. “No limits,” said one San Luis scholar, representing the mantra for all.

The findings in this study confirm that having an equity-minded staff who sees students with assets and cultural wealth, and cultivates students' higher education aspirations is foundational to college preparation.



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