

[PRINCIPLES AND FRAMEWORKS]

A Framework for Understanding Latino/a Cultural Wealth

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For decades, higher education's work to support student success has been built on a grand narrative in which underserved and underrepresented students from low-income backgrounds are portrayed as "high risk," "high maintenance," "underprepared," or "culturally deprived" (see, for example, Delgado Bernal 2010; Moll et al. 2001; Yosso 2005). Absent from this deficit-based narrative are asset-based views about the cultural wealth that students employ to transcend their socioeconomic circumstances and to excel in education.

To learn more about students' assets, we conducted a qualitative research study supported by TG Philanthropy to examine the experiences of Latino/a students at one Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), the University of Texas at San Antonio. We held focus groups with forty-seven students, six of whom also participated in one- to two-hour videotaped interviews. Guided primarily by asset-based theoretical frameworks developed by Latino/a scholars (see, for example, Anzaldúa 1999; Delgado Bernal 2010; Moll et al. 2001; Yosso 2005), we analyzed transcripts to identify common themes. Here, we summarize findings related to the upsides and downsides of a Latino/a college experience. We also identify Latino/a cultural wealth expressed as *ventajas y conocimientos* (assets and knowledge) that students employ to their advantage. Our goal is for practitioners to leverage these

cultural assets to foster student success. (For a complete discussion of our findings, see Rendón, Nora, and Kanagala 2014.)

The Upsides and Downsides of College

Every life transition carries upsides and downsides. For many students in our study, attending college represented a time of great excitement. They appreciated making new friends, learning new perspectives, gaining new experiences, and interacting with diverse peers. They benefited from faculty support and validation, active and applied learning strategies, advising and mentoring, peer support networks, financial aid, a welcoming campus climate, and interactions across diverse cultures. When asked how attending college had changed them, students said, among other things, that college had made them more mature, confident, inquisitive, and independent.

At the same time, students faced formidable challenges associated with transitioning and adapting to college, a dynamic that has been discussed in the research literature (Delgado Bernal 2010; Nora 2001; Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora 2000). Their transitions were not linear as students found themselves operating *entre mundos*—moving back and forth among multiple contexts such as the family, *barrio*/community, native country, work, peers, and spiritual

worlds. They also encountered what Anzaldúa calls "*un choque*" (1999, 78), or cultural collision as they transitioned from their familiar worlds to the unfamiliar world of college. The *choque* was marked by experiencing liminality; experiencing separation anxiety; negotiating dislocation and relocation; and dealing with racial and gender microaggressions. Additionally, students described burdens related to paying for college, a lack of college readiness, and inadequate advising.

Latino/a Cultural Wealth

Our study confirmed that Latino/a students have formidable cultural wealth, both *ventajas* (assets or personal resources) and what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "*conocimientos*" (knowledge or awareness that evolves through specific life experiences) (Lara 2005). We employed Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model as a starting point to identify specific *ventajas*/assets that students possessed and used to their advantage. Yosso's framework includes six forms of cultural wealth: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Our study uncovered four additional forms of *ventajas y conocimientos*: *ganas*/perseverance, ethnic consciousness, spirituality/faith, and pluriversal cultural wealth.

Aspirational Wealth: Students were hopeful about their futures, aspiring to complete college and enter professions such as engineering, science, or politics. Their aspirations were often shaped by validating agents (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents) who shared *testimonios*/life stories about overcoming adversity and who provided support and *consejos*/sage advice. Community role models also fostered aspirations and hope for the future.

Linguistic Wealth: Students recognized that being bilingual in Spanish and English helped them communicate and form relationships with others. They

also demonstrated communication skills as they operated in multiple contexts requiring different forms of language expression.

Familial Wealth: The family provided critical support, with mothers playing an especially central role. Students accumulated familial capital through validation, *consejos/sage* advice, and role modeling; they were determined to complete life goals not only for themselves but also for their families.

Social Wealth: To develop social capital, students capitalized on their friendships, their social networks, and the lessons they learned from interacting with peers. While students expressed the value of diversity and of learning from different cultures, they relied especially on networks formed with other Latino/a students.

Navigational Wealth: Navigating within multiple, distinct worlds (*barrio*, peers, native country, family, spirituality, college) was a key strategy. Each new context required its own mental script and language code, as well as its own intellectual and behavioral conventions.

Resistant Wealth: Students experienced racial and gender microaggressions, as well as culture shock, in college. Through those experiences, they acquired resistant capital, which they came to depend on when facing academic and social obstacles.

Ganas/Perseverant Wealth: Determination, self-reliance, and inner confidence underlie this *ventaja*. Students refused to quit, and they also recognized and embraced the sacrifices they made in going to college. Admirably, students were able to overcome difficult challenges such as being undocumented, lacking role models and mentors in their communities, experiencing poverty, and attending poorly resourced schools.

Ethnic Consciousness Wealth: Shared experiences of social and educational inequity may foster

solidarity among Latino/a students, resulting in what Padilla called “ethnic consciousness” (1985, 61). This ethnic consciousness manifested in students’ deep commitment to give back to their families and communities and in their sense that personal accomplishment could benefit the Latino/a collective whole. Students were overwhelmingly proud of their heritage and proud to attend an HSI.

Spiritual/Faith-Based Wealth: Students often relied on their faith in God for strength in difficult situations. They also were guided by a broader sense of spirituality that included gratitude, compassion, and a sense of purpose in life, as well as a positive view of the world and a deep sense of humanitarianism.

Pluriversal Wealth: Students were able to function with pluriversality similar to what Anzaldúa terms “*mestiza* consciousness” (1999, 77), a state of perpetual transition where concepts and behaviors cannot be held within rigid boundaries. This ability to make identity, language, and behavioral shifts while moving successfully in and out of multiple social and intellectual spaces likely gave students a tolerance for ambiguities and contradictions.

Leveraging Students’ *Ventajas y Conocimientos*

Our findings clearly substantiate that deficit-based assumptions about low-income, first-generation Latino/a students are erroneous. Students have extraordinary strengths, the drive to succeed, and the ability to be transformed by their college experiences. College faculty and staff need to learn more about Latino/a students’ college experiences, reframe their assumptions about these students, and develop asset-based frameworks to foster student success. Equipped with their own toolboxes of *ventajas y conocimientos* and with support and validation from college faculty

and staff, Latino/a students can definitely complete a college education. ☐

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