

Educational Aspirations: Supporting College Trajectories for Latino Youth

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation investigates the ways in which Latino youth access information and support as they develop and pursue their educational aspirations. Using a mixed methods design, the dissertation identifies the role of family, teachers, and peers in the early stages of the college preparation process. It also highlights students' agency in the mobilization of supportive individuals. The quantitative study uses self-report survey data from 223 Latino 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to assess the unique contribution of support for college from family, teachers, and peers on adolescents' educational goals, values, and behaviors. Findings from this study suggest that family plays a critical role in the development of educational goals and values while peers are most influential in students' school effort. These results also point to the importance of academic self-efficacy and the potential of this construct to shape students' college orientations. The qualitative study continues to explore these relationships using interviews with 20 Latino 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. Findings suggest that there are three different approaches to college preparation during the early years of high school. These approaches vary in the extent to which youth receive support from others and take an active role in their own preparation. The first group of students benefit from family, teachers, and peers who encourage their educational aspirations and provide concrete instructions for how to turn those goals into a reality. These students also take advantage of their access to information and resources. The second group of students experiences high levels of support from significant others and engages in behaviors that prepare them for college. However, this group of students

focuses on academic preparation and is not yet involved in acquiring specific information about higher education. Finally, the third group struggles academically and does not think about their plans for after high school. They are not offered the support they need to prepare for post-secondary education and do not seek out that support themselves. Together, the findings from both studies indicate that the early stages of preparation for college require a combination of supportive contexts and adolescent agency.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Although the specific purpose of the American school system has changed over the years, its promise as a vehicle for social and economic mobility has remained constant. Considered the gateway to occupational success and self fulfillment, education prepares individuals for entry into the workforce (Elmore, 2009). Changes in the nature of the economy result in changes in the nature of education, and this relationship is evident in current discussions of educational policy, research, and reform. The recent transition of the economy from an industrial financial system to a technological market has shifted educational focus from high school graduation to college readiness and success (Balfanz, 2009; Callan et al., 2006). Graduates with high school diplomas who were once on the path to lucrative careers are now relegated to low-paying jobs within manufacturing and service sectors as a college education is required in order to successfully compete for high-paying jobs in today's "knowledge economy." While the percentage of youth enrolling in a college or university has increased over the past several decades, not all secondary students receive the preparation they need to pursue higher education. According to the U.S. Department of Education, between 62% and 69% of high school graduates currently enroll in post-secondary institutions immediately after high school, an increase from 49% in 1972 (NCES, 2008). However, that percentage is influenced by ethnicity and socioeconomic status such that some groups of students enroll in higher education at substantially lower rates than others. Low-income, Latino

adolescents have the lowest enrollment rates in post-secondary education constituting just 11.4% of students attending colleges or universities (NCES, 2009).

This educational statistic is particularly disconcerting as Latino youth represent the fastest growing sector of public school enrollment and are more likely to live in poverty than their Caucasian peers (Velez & Saenz, 2001; Yowell, 1999). In 2006, Latino students constituted 20% of public school enrollment, an increase of 14% from 1972. In 2002 these youth became the largest minority group in the nation's schools (NCES, 2008). Thus, low enrollment rates of Latino youth in higher education represent the failure of the educational system to prepare a significant proportion of its students for occupational success. In addition, the high incidence of poverty within the Latino community indicates that these youth have the most to gain from participation in post-secondary education. In 2007, the poverty rate among Latino individuals was 21.5%, almost three times the rate among Caucasians (8.2%) and twice the rate among Asians (10.2%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). While the poverty rate among Latinos is slightly less than the rate among Blacks (24.5%), the only group to experience an increase in poverty between 2006 and 2007 was the Latino population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The poverty rate is even more extreme for Latinos under the age of 18, 28.6% of whom live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). If the new purpose of American high schools is to prepare students for higher education and continue their role as the gateway to social mobility, we must identify ways to increase college readiness among Latino youth.

A variety of terms are used to describe education's new mission of increasing enrollment in higher education, particularly among students from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds. "College access", "college readiness", "college preparation",

and “college awareness” are just a few of the terms scholars use to describe the skills and knowledge high school graduates need to successfully transition to post-secondary education. Some of this work focuses on the academic indicators required for college admittance and the ability of youth to “measure up” to these standards (Adelman, 2007). Other research emphasizes the need to look beyond traditional status markers of ability and determine whether students have the content knowledge and interdisciplinary skills necessary for academic success in college (Callan et al., 2006; Conley, 2007; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Still others restrict their work to the financial barriers and constraints that prohibit students from enrolling in post-secondary institutions (Long, 2007). Each of these bodies of literature advances and extends our knowledge of what it will take to ensure that all high school graduates have the opportunity to pursue higher education.

When applied to a discussion of the educational careers of Latino youth, these research agendas often highlight the ways in which access to higher education is denied to this student population. The work highlights structural barriers including limited access to high quality teachers and curriculum as well as background barriers such as language and poverty (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2004; Gamoran, Porter, Smithson, & White, 1997; Kershaw, 1992; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). However, attention to what doesn’t work provides few constructive suggestions for how to improve the educational attainment of Latino students. As educational reform becomes more evidence-based, it is important to identify factors that promote educational attainment among this population. These factors can then be incorporated into effective interventions that increase the success of Latino youth.

The present study examines the contexts that support the development and pursuit of higher education goals among Latino youth. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from both Psychology and Sociology, this study investigates the ways in which encouragement and guidance from various people interact with individual student agency to influence Latino youth's educational outcomes. Specifically, the relationship between the family, school, and peer contexts and students' educational aspirations and school effort is explored as is students' own role in their preparation for college.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Researchers interested in examining possible reasons for the low educational attainment of Latino youth often draw on two theoretical frameworks to guide their work. The first is social capital theory which highlights factors that may influence a student's access to important forms of support. Defined as "resources embedded in social relations and social structure which can be mobilized when an actor wishes to increase the likelihood of success in purposive actions" (Lin, 2001, 24), the term social capital describes the ways in which individuals may use resources that belong to members of their social network in order to pursue a specific goal. Both the benefits of social capital and its usefulness are dependent upon the individual's membership to a social network, the quality and relevance of the information and resources possessed by the network, and the willingness of network members to share those resources (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Driven by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, various conceptualizations of social capital differentially emphasize these criteria. Research that extends from Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital focuses on the likelihood that a social network will possess the information and resources necessary for individual action

(Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, the characteristics of a social network that determine its position in the broader social hierarchy (e.g. social class, race, gender) will likewise determine its possession of resources that may be useful for individual advancement (McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 2005). Such work highlights differential access to important information and resources and the perpetuation of social stratification that results.

Research that adopts Coleman's conceptualization of social capital focuses on the willingness of the social network to share its embedded resources (Coleman, 1988). Fundamental to this conceptualization is an emphasis on the norms shared by social networks and the way these expectations and values are communicated to members of the group. It is believed that social networks with shared values and high levels of trust are more likely to have members who are willing to share information and resources. Thus, Coleman and the scholars who adopt his framework suggest that individuals who belong to tight-knit communities are more likely to benefit from social capital, as such closeness enables the communication of consistent values and norms and facilitates the sharing of information and resources (Coleman, 1988; Terrion, 2006).

Many scholars interested in the ways in which significant others support and foster college trajectories for youth adopt a social capital framework (Dika & Singh, 2001; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Gonzalez, Sonter, Jovel, 2003; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tierney & Venegas, 2006; Valenzuela, 2005). Within this literature, the term social capital is used to describe students' access to information and resources necessary for academic achievement and attainment through their social networks. Access to such information increases familiarity with institutions of higher

education and the requirements for college acceptance which impact all stages of the college planning, application, and enrollment process. Students who have connections to individuals who can provide support and guidance concerning which high school courses universities require, when students should take the SAT or ACT, and ways to finance higher education are better positioned to develop and realize college aspirations (McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). This information also fosters an awareness of college culture and what the college experience entails. Such insight increases the ability of students to generate cognitive representations of themselves as college students and positions higher education as a realistic future opportunity, two factors required for students to successfully engage in the college decision-making process (Evans, 2006).

Despite its contribution to knowledge concerning the structural factors and relationship characteristics that foster or inhibit effective information exchange, research that adopts a social capital framework still has not reached its potential for elucidating the mechanisms through which adolescents learn about and pursue postsecondary education. Often this work does not consider the multiple social networks of which an adolescent is a part and the ways in which those networks impact each other. Similarly, it does not give credence to the adolescent's own ability to seek out and manage resources, assuming instead that adolescents play a passive role in the transmission of valuable information. A second theoretical perspective from the discipline of psychology can help fill these gaps. The ecological model of human development asserts that scholarship must consider both environmental and individual level forces that shape academic goals. According to Bronfenbrenner, an individual's development is the result of personal characteristics, the

environment, and the interaction between the two. He states, “Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 621). This framework highlights the influence that different contexts may have on one another and the ways in which these interactions impact individual development. Applied to the study of college aspirations, the ecological model suggests that research consider the various environments that impact an adolescent’s decision to pursue higher education. According to this perspective, contexts should be examined simultaneously and researchers should attend to the relationships between these contexts (Woolley, Kohl, & Bowen, 2009). In addition, adolescents’ own educational attitudes and beliefs must be examined as they, too, are likely to impact educational outcomes. Thus, a complete understanding of the college decision-making process requires research that examines both contextual and individual level factors concurrently.

Several researchers who adopt the ecological framework address the need to examine multiple social networks at once and the ways in which they impact adolescents’ educational outcomes both directly and indirectly through their relationships with each other. In his examination of both the family and school contexts, Crosnoe (2004) found that relationship quality with parents and teachers had an additive effect on educational outcomes. Moreover, students who reported high emotional support from parents were also more likely to report strong bonds with teachers, indicating that positive relationships within one context may contribute to positive relationships in another. Steinberg and colleagues (1995) also found that academic support from both parents and

peers lead to better academic achievement for youth than encouragement from just one context. However, parents and peers played slightly different roles in the educational lives of youth. Support from parents influenced adolescents' educational plans while support from friends impacted daily behaviors such as homework completion. Work that examines family, school, and peer contexts simultaneously has found varying results with some studies highlighting the importance of teachers and school personnel and others suggesting that support from the family plays the primary role in students' educational outcomes (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Plunkett, Henry, Houlberg, Sands, & Abarca-Mortensen, 2008; Woolley, Kol, & Boewn, 2009). While this research begins to address the importance of attending to multiple contexts and their combined impact on educational outcomes, it does not consider the additional influence of individual-level factors. Thus, the role of the adolescent in his or her own educational career continues to be an area in need of study.

The literature review that follows presents current research regarding the impact of various contexts on the development and pursuit of adolescents' college aspirations. The Latino student population faces many challenges on the road to college enrollment and these environmental demands must be given consideration in order to fully illustrate the academic lives of these youth. However, the focus of this review is the ability of social networks to support and encourage adolescents' educational goals and to foster academic resilience within difficult environments. Previous research concerning the ways in which adolescents themselves impact their educational careers is also presented, highlighting the importance of considering both contextual and individual factors simultaneously when examining the educational attainment of youth.

## Literature Review

While there is great diversity among the Latino population, many Latino youth live and learn in environments that present significant challenges to their academic achievement. High rates of poverty among this population as well as their status as ethnic and cultural minorities present significant barriers in multiple contexts. Financial struggles associated with poverty result in demanding work schedules for Latino parents that may limit the amount of time they are able to spend at home (Entwisle & Alexander, 1995; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Latino families are also characterized by high rates of mobility as parents seek out work opportunities. Multiple moves between neighborhoods can disrupt the academic lives of Latino youth as important relationships are lost and curricula often differ between schools (Ream, 2005; Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007). Ream and Stanton-Salazar (2007) describe this difficulty stating, “Most important, we believe, the development of supportive ties with school personnel is difficult due to cultural and language differences, racialized identities, and social class distinctions, which create infertile ground for developing trust, positive affect, and mutual emotional investment. Such conditions particularly when combined with the added problem of mobility can a) inhibit help-seeking behaviors among Mexican-origin youth, and b) dissuade school personnel from conscientiously investing in the academic success of minorities” (p. 75).

In addition, if parents did not attend school in the United States they may be unfamiliar with American school practices. Scholars have highlighted the incongruence between some Latino cultural values and American expectations concerning classroom behavior and parental involvement (Okagaki, 2001). Latino parents often teach their

children to have a deep respect for professionals, known as *respeto*, which may prohibit students from engaging in the types of classroom participation (e.g. questioning the teacher) that American schools value. Through the cultural value of *educación*, Latino parents teach their children the manners and social skills that will be important for life within the classroom. However, schools expect that parents also provide preparation that includes academic skills and content, and they may view Latino students as being ill-prepared without this kind of home involvement.

Lack of familiarity with the American education system among Latino parents is particularly salient with regards to higher education. Students whose parents are not college graduates themselves may not have access at home to the information they need to successfully navigate the college application process (Portes, 1998). Parental attempts to obtain information about higher education may be thwarted by language barriers as well as the reactions of other individuals. In a literature review examining the treatment of low-income parents within schools, Lott (2001) systematically describes the way in which these parents are devalued and ignored when they try to become involved in their children's education. Even if school personnel are receptive to parents' attempts, a lack of translation services or Spanish-language materials may hinder success (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

School contexts provide additional challenges to the educational success of Latino youth. These students disproportionately attend schools with limited educational resources, supportive teachers, and college counseling opportunities (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). Scholars employ multiple terms to describe these educational experiences including "institutional abuse and

neglect,” “subtractive schooling,” and “counterfeit social capital” (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Ream, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005). Each of these descriptions highlights the ways in which some teachers and counselors engage in practices that actively restrict students’ access to high quality curriculum and college preparation. For instance, students from minority backgrounds are overrepresented in low-ability groups or vocational, non-college prep tracks regardless of the ability level of the students (Gamoran, Porter, Smithson, & White, 1997; Kershaw, 1992; Lucas & Berends, 2002). These lower track classrooms expose students to less content at a slower pace and are more likely to be led by inexperienced, less qualified teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2004; Gamoran, Porter, Smithson, & White, 1997; Gamoran & Weinstein, 1998).

Anyon (1981, 1997) describes the way in which the racial and socioeconomic background of students changes teacher expectations and behavior. Teachers altered the content and instruction of courses based on assumptions concerning the academic ability of poor, African American students and the utility of certain types of knowledge for this population. These students were not given access to rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum as teachers believed it was a waste of time and resources to provide such opportunities to students who would never enroll in higher education. The teachers described by Valenzuela (2005) and Ream (2003) limit the support they provide to Latino students in more subtle ways. According to Valenzuela, cultural mismatch between Latino students and their Caucasian teachers results in reduced support within the classroom. “Teachers expect students to *care about* school in a technical fashion before they *care for* them, while students expect teachers to *care for* them before they *care about* school” (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 83). When students and teachers do not connect and

form supportive bonds, teachers are less likely to provide students with information and resources and students are less likely to seek out that help (Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Limited access to rigorous curriculum is complemented by a lack of college counseling resources within the schools many Latino youth attend, further limiting their chances of successfully pursuing higher education. Indeed, the Latina community college students interviewed by Gonzalez and colleagues (2003) described markedly different experiences than those of their peers who attended four-year universities. Students who ultimately enrolled in community colleges reported college counseling offices that were overburdened with counselors who directed their services to students in specific academic honors programs (the students counselors deemed as destined for four-year institutions) and in some cases explicitly discouraged students from pursuing higher education (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). Such experiences mirror those of other ethnic minority, low-income youth who disproportionately attend schools with limited or no college counseling offices, places where college-going support is typically fostered (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004).

Despite these challenges to academic achievement, some Latino youth manage to succeed, indicating that there may be factors that promote success even within these difficult contexts. Indeed, Cooper and colleagues (2002) assert that environments should be conceptualized as both challenges and resources in the study of academic resilience among ethnic minority youth. Students participating in their studies simultaneously identify both challenges and resources that exist within the contexts of home, school, peers, and community (Cooper et al., 2002). A significant body of literature is emerging

that focuses on the support and guidance Latino youth receive from the significant others in their lives and the ways in which such encouragement increases educational attainment. Such work provides an important contribution as it uncovers the positive, protective forces that can be used to inform efforts to improve the academic achievement of Latino youth.

### **Family Support for Education**

Parents and family members engage in a variety of activities that help promote the educational achievement of youth. Such involvement has been conceptualized through a variety of frameworks that emphasize the ways in which parents support academic achievement both in the home and through interactions with the school. Epstein (2001) describes the various activities that constitute home-based and school-based involvement and reasons for their impact on the educational success of children. Home-based involvement includes activities that occur outside of school between parents and children. These activities may include discussions about school, help with homework, or family trips to educational sites such as museums. School-based involvement describes the ways in which parents interact with a child's school through parent-teacher conferences, classroom visits, and volunteering activities.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) further unpack the various ways in which parents engage in their children's schooling through the identification of three types of involvement: behavior, cognitive-intellectual, and personal. Each of these types of involvement transcends contextual boundaries and describes activities that occur in both home and school environments. Parents who attend parent-teacher conferences and help their children at home with homework are considered to be behaviorally involved in their

children's schooling. Cognitive-intellectual involvement includes activities that contribute to children's cognitive development such as discussions about current events or trips outside the home. Personal involvement refers to the ways in which parents monitor their children's achievement. This can be accomplished through conversations with teachers and school administrators as well as discussions with children regarding their scholastic lives.

The ways in which parents support the academic achievement of their children change over time as children develop and proceed through different stages of schooling. The types of support parents provide during elementary school may be qualitatively different than the practices that are effective as children progress through middle and high school. Indeed, in a meta-analysis of parental involvement during the middle school years, Hill and Tyson (2009) found that parents engaged in different activities and practices during this stage than in previous years. Such practices correspond with both developmental changes in the child and structural changes in schools. Hill and Tyson (2009) call this new set of parental involvement strategies "academic socialization" which "includes communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking school-work to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future" (p. 742). While home-based and school-based involvement continued to be positively related to academic achievement during middle school, practices aligned with academic socialization were more powerful predictors of educational success in their analysis of results from 50 previous research studies.

Research examining the support that parents provide during the development and pursuit of educational aspirations in high school corresponds to Hill and Tyson's conceptualization of academic socialization. Parent-child discussions and activities that emphasize the value and importance of education and demonstrate family members' high expectations for academic success are important components of family social support as adolescents make future plans (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Croll, 2004). Chen and Gregory (2009) found that ninth graders' reports of parental expectations for school performance and parental academic encouragement predicted both teacher reports of student classroom engagement as well as grades. Similar results have been found with nationally representative samples (Anguiano, 2004; Wilson & Wilson, 1992). Hong and Ho (2005) examined the relationship between parent-child communication, parental aspirations, adolescent aspirations, and academic achievement in their study using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). Students' reports of parent-child discussions about school activities and plans and parents' educational aspirations predicted students' educational aspirations in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These educational goals subsequently predicted academic achievement four years later when the students were in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

The importance of such home-based forms of support is particularly salient among Latino families as numerous challenges including language barriers and a lack of familiarity with American schools make school-based involvement difficult (Turney & Kao, 2009). While Latino parents engage in school-based forms of parental involvement less frequently than their European counterparts, the types of support characterized by academic socialization are prevalent in Latino homes (Desimone, 1999; Valadez, 2002).

Latino parents have high educational aspirations for their children and believe strongly in the value of education (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995; Spera, 2006). In turn, these educational aspirations exert powerful influences over students' academic lives and have been found to be the most important predictors of students' own expectations (Trusty, Plata, & Salazar, 2003). In his study of 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade immigrant students, Fuligni examined factors related to academic achievement among these youth (Fuligni, 1997). He found that the value parents place on education is a significant contributor to students' academic achievement. The students in his study internalized such messages and reported high levels of educational value themselves which also impacted levels of achievement. In order to express the value of education, parents may engage in practices such as rewarding good grades and providing consequences for poor performance.

One way these expectations and goals are expressed is through parent-child conversations about school. The Latino parents interviewed by Auerbach (2006) provide rich examples of the ways in which they supported their children's college aspirations. These parents constantly emphasized the importance of hard work, encouraged their children when they struggled, and used cultural values of *educación* to prepare their children for the social demands of school. Approximately 80 Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican parents interviewed by Zarate (2007) also emphasized the importance of *educación* and a holistic awareness of their children's educational lives in discussions of parental involvement. Indeed, among these parents of middle and high school ages youth, talking with children and encouraging their educational goals and aspirations was deemed more important than traditional school-based involvement.

Parents also transmit these beliefs through behaviors and parenting practices. Such practices can be both directly and implicitly tied to the value of education. Martinez, DeGarmo, and Eddy (2004) found that Latino parents of middle and high school students who rewarded good grades and established consequences for poor school performance had children who were more likely to complete their homework and school assignments increasing academic achievement. Allowing students to skip or postpone chores and responsibilities around the house in order to focus on homework and studying also demonstrates to youth the importance of education (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009; Ceballo, 2004). The importance of education is expressed by Latino parents through behaviors that demonstrate the utility of academic achievement and attainment (Auerbach, 2006; Lopez, 2001). Using case study methods, Lopez (2001) explored the way a single family supported their children's education. This father, engaged in migrant work, brought his children with him to work to demonstrate the need to work hard in school in order to avoid similar manual-labor, low-paying jobs. Thus, he provided a concrete example of the consequences of not having high levels of educational attainment.

Cultivating the value of education and expressing high aspirations for their children creates a family social network that fosters discussions and behaviors specifically related to the pursuit of higher education. The importance of such support is demonstrated by the comments made by the 10 Puerto Rican 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who earned a grade point average of 3.0 or higher in a study conducted by Antrop-Gonzalez and colleagues (2005). These students spoke about the help and guidance they received from their mothers and the ways in which their mothers sought out resources

when they themselves could not provide assistance (Antrop-Gonzalez, Velez, & Garrett, 2005). These students' mothers found homework help when they were not able to personally assist their children, located test prep materials for college, and enrolled their children in college preparation programs.

In order to obtain the information their children need to successfully complete the college application process, some parents become involved in college information programs themselves. Such participation enables parents to guide and assist their children as they tackle the task of preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in higher education (Kim & Schneider, 2005). Auerbach (2007) calls these parents "struggling advocates," highlighting the effort with which they seek out the information and resources they need in order to better assist their children. Fann, Jarsky, and McDonough (2009) describe efforts to establish college information workshops for parents through a university partnership. The Latino parents who attended these workshops cared deeply about their children's education and acknowledged the need to pursue information about the college process. These parents requested information about financial aid, college admissions requirements, and the SAT and ACT. In addition to participation in college information programs, such parents initiate contact with school counselors and personnel, engage in online research concerning the college application process, and leverage their own social networks to gain necessary information (Auerbach, 2007; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006).

The importance of messages concerning the value of education as well as other types of encouragement and emotional support extend into decisions regarding post-secondary education and success in college (Ceballo, 2004; Gandara, 1995). In their

comparison of Mexican American students attending 2-year colleges to Mexican American students not enrolled in higher education, Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007) found that parents' aspirations, encouragement, and assistance predicted college attendance. Research conducted by Ong, Phinney, and Dennis (2006) suggests that perceived parental support also increases academic achievement while students are in college. Students who reported high levels of encouragement, educational value, and understanding from parents earned better grades than students who did not experience such parental support.

Current research suggests that the support provided by the family social network including parents, siblings, and extended kin may be especially important among Latino youth (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Trusty, Plata, & Salazar, 2003). *Familismo*, the emphasis placed on family ties and the importance of family assistance among this population, may increase the significance of family social capital in adolescents' college access (Fulgini, 2001; Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). In their study of 143 Latino high school seniors, Esparza and Sanchez (2008) found that students who endorsed high levels of *familismo* reported higher levels of academic effort than their peers who did not indicate strong ties to this cultural value. They also reported skipping classes less often than their peers. Support from siblings, cousins, and other family members close in age to the adolescent may be particularly important. Older siblings can provide sources of academic support such as help with homework and guidance in educational planning when parents' own educational background does not prepare them for that type of assistance (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007). In his interviews with 20 Chicana seniors, Ceja (2006) found that

siblings were a valuable source of information regarding the college application process, due to language barriers and parents' limited knowledge of the American educational system.

Informed by this literature, the present study examines the way in which family members support the educational goals, values, and effort of Latino youth. Given the demonstrated importance of such individuals in the lives of adolescents generally and Latino youth in particular, it is hypothesized that family support for college will be directly and significantly related to these educational outcomes.

### **Teacher Support for Education**

Many teachers and counselors also support the academic achievement and college aspirations of Latino youth (Calaff, 2008; Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004). Similar to parental support and involvement, positive relationships with teachers and school staff impact educational outcomes across development for youth (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008). The nature of this support and its benefits changes over time as students progress through different stages of schooling. In elementary school, teachers provide support and encouragement to students through the development of positive student-teacher relationships in which teachers express how much they care about student well-being. In their study of 282 third grade students, Elias and Haynes (2008) found that student reports of teacher support at the beginning of the year predicted grades and attendance at the end of the year. Students who believed their teachers cared about them performed better at the end of the year. Similar results were obtained by Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) in their study of fifth grade students. Teacher support predicted engagement in school among their sample of 602 students.

Similar to changes in the nature of parental involvement over the course of students' academic careers, the activities that constitute teacher support become more diversified as students enter middle and high school. Adolescents continue to benefit from socially and emotionally supportive interactions with teachers (Goodenow, 1993; Murray, 2009). Such relationships, particularly among ethnic/minority youth, are an important component of a school culture that students describe as a family. In his comparison of different high school programs and their affect on adolescent achievement, Conchas (2006) highlights the importance of caring adults in creating a school environment that facilitates success among Latino youth. During interviews, students in one academic program described the close bonds they developed with teachers and the ways in which these supportive ties motivated them to succeed. The students in Jewett's (2009) study described similar sentiments. These middle school youth likened their school community to a "second family" and discussed the ways in which teacher support fostered feelings of belonging and comfort in their school. Teachers knew what was going on in the lives of their students both academically and personally through constant conversations and school practices that enabled the development of student-teacher relationships.

While caring interactions are the foundation of positive relationships, teacher support during adolescence expands to include academic guidance and educational planning as well. As adolescents become more involved in their own educational decision-making, they draw on teachers as mentors and resources for information. The emotional support they receive from teachers and school staff is accompanied by high expectations for success and the provision of advice concerning adolescents' current and

future plans (Ceballo, Huerta, & Epstein-Ngo, in press). This combination represents “hard caring,” a phenomenon that De-Jesus and Antrop-Gonzales (2006) suggest is required for the academic achievement and attainment of ethnic minority youth. The researchers assert that effective teaching “recognizes that students of color will not benefit from forms of caring that are not tied to the expectation of academic excellence” (De-Jesus & Antrop-Gonzales, 2006, p. 294).

Indeed, teachers’ expectations for students’ success are a core component of effective high schools for Latino students (Katz, 1999; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). In a pioneering study examining the relationship between teacher expectations and student achievement, Rosenthal (1968) demonstrated the critical role of teacher beliefs on students’ educational outcomes. The researcher falsely informed teachers of students’ academic capabilities at the beginning of the school year, indicating a random group of students who would be academic “bloomers” over the course of the year. Teachers subsequently altered their behaviors to favor those students who were believed to be more capable learners despite any actual differences in intelligence between the two student groups. By the end of the year, students in the “bloomer” group had achieved significantly more than students in the control group on test scores, grades, and IQ scores indicating the power of teacher expectations.

The importance of teacher beliefs continues to be highlighted in recent work with samples consisting of Latino high school students. In their examination of six high schools in California and Arizona serving large Latino student populations, Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) found that high teacher expectations were integral to student academic achievement. Such expectations were evidenced through the language teachers

used with the students, the support students received during the college application process, and special school rituals designed to recognize student achievement. Teacher beliefs exert an important influence even when they are examined alongside family factors. Kuperminc, Darnell, and Alvarez-Jimenez (2009) found that teacher expectations mediated the relationship between parental involvement and academic adjustment among their sample of 129 Latino high school youth.

Thus, adolescents who perceive their teachers as caring, talk with their teachers about future plans, and believe their teachers have high expectations for their success are more likely to achieve academically (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Weinstein, 2002). They are also more likely to develop high educational aspirations and pursue such goals. Using the NELS database, Croninger and Lee (2001) examined the influence of teacher-student relationships on educational achievement in a nationally representative sample of 11,000 10<sup>th</sup> grade adolescents. The researchers found that students who believed their teachers supported their academic achievement were less likely to drop out of high school between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. In addition, students who discussed both scholastic and personal issues with their teachers were more likely to graduate from high school than those students who did not engage in such discussions. The thirteen African American, first-generation college students interviewed by Reid and Moore (2008) in their study of college access identified teachers, counselors, and school mentors as influential to their post-secondary pursuits. These adults encouraged students to achieve academically, pushed them to consider higher education, and provided constant emotional support throughout the application process. Similar experiences are described by Latina university students in a study by Gonzalez and colleagues (2003). Students attending 4-

year institutions benefited from the academic encouragement, life skills training, and friendship provided by their middle and high school teachers.

Such encouragement facilitates the important role teachers and counselors can play in the transmission of information and resources regarding the college application process. Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) describe the way in which teachers and counselors can create a “college going culture” through the provision of information and resources. They conducted a case study of a college preparatory charter school outside of Chicago that served low-income, minority youth. The school was chartered by parents and community members with the intention of increasing college enrollment among neighborhood youth. The school successfully fosters a college-going culture among its 400 students. The teachers and counselors at this school had frequent formal and informal discussions with students, hung posters that emphasized the importance of going to college, and found ways to incorporate college attendance into seemingly unrelated conversations. For instance, one counselor reported using college attendance to discuss behavior problems with a student saying, “Every time I see her in a situation I ask her, ‘How is this going to help you be a writer and do that creative writing degree?’” (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006, p.109). In addition to establishing norms around college attendance, the counselors designed courses, planned trips to visit colleges, and created a summer internship program to give students access to the information and experiences they would need to successfully apply to college.

The demonstrated importance of teachers as both providers of social support and gatekeepers suggests that they are influential in the development of students’ educational goals, values, and effort. Such a relationship is expected to be evidenced in the present

study with teacher support for college exhibiting a significant association with educational aspirations, expectations, values, and school effort.

### **Peer Support for Education**

Increasing significance of the peer group during adolescence suggests that peers may play an important role in the academic achievement and attainment of youth. During this developmental stage, adolescents' quest for independence from the family context directs their attention towards the peer group. As a result, this social network impacts many of the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors of youth (Brown & Larson, 2009). Several studies examine the potential of friendship groups to influence academic achievement and suggest that peers may constitute an important source of social support influencing academic attainment (Crosnoe, Cavanaugh, and Elder, 2003; Goldstein, 2003; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Stokach, 2006). Crosnoe, Cavanaugh, and Elder (2003) used a subsample from the AddHealth dataset to examine the ways in which peers impact academic achievement. With a sample of 9,223 White and African American adolescents, they found that students whose friends do well in school and like school are more likely to achieve academically and avoid behavior problems compared to students who surround themselves with low-achieving peers. Similar results were obtained by Cook, Deng, and Morgano (2007) in their study of 901 African American, White, and Asian youth. Among this sample, having "good" friends led to positive educational outcomes. Specifically, students whose friends did well in school, felt confident in their school performance, and provided social support had higher rates of achievement and attendance. Friends' grade point averages emerged as particularly salient in the

educational outcomes of youth, suggesting that the academic performance of peers may be a more powerful predictor of adolescents' academic achievement than other factors.

Unfortunately, there is a body of research indicating that ethnic minority youth attending urban schools do not always benefit from a peer culture that supports academic achievement (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Lew, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Taylor & Graham, 2007). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that the peer networks of ethnic minority, urban adolescents often conceive of academic achievement as the purview of White students. According to these researchers, many youth believe succeeding in school means "acting White" and abandoning your ethnic heritage (Ogbu, 1990). Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) examined students' perceptions of "acting White" among 166 African American middle and high school students identified as gifted by their school district. Students' responses to open-ended survey items emphasized the connection between "acting White" and academic achievement. More than half of the youth knew someone who had been teased because of their success in school and almost half had been ridiculed themselves. Being smart and doing well in school were attributed to "acting White" while underachieving and hiding intelligence were considered "acting Black".

While many ethnic minority students encounter peer networks that discourage academic achievement, there are also students from similar backgrounds who benefit from supportive relationships with peers (Flores-Gonzalez, 2005; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Such academic encouragement may exist at the school level or be provided within small friendship groups amidst a broader peer culture that is less supportive of academic pursuits. In a comparison of peer-perceived admiration

among middle-class, suburban and inner-city, poor middle school students, Becker and Luthar (2007) found that youth from both contexts admired peers who were considered to work hard in school, achieve academically, and conform to school rules. Moreover, in a separate analysis using only data from students who attended the urban school, the researchers found that Latino youth were more likely to admire academically oriented peers than were students from other racial backgrounds.

When this type of peer culture is not present, adolescents may access academic support through the creation of smaller friendship groups. Previous research on adolescent friendships suggests that similarity between friends is the result of selection, socialization, and deselection with youth choosing friends who have similar values and interests (Brown & Larson, 2009). Once friendships are formed based on similarity they are either maintained through the collective cultivation of shared values and interests or they are discontinued due to changes in these qualities. Academic orientation is one quality that drives the development of friendships with youth forming ties with peers who have similar educational values and behaviors. In their study of 1,062 Mexican American high school students, Ream and Rumberger (2008) found that youth who were academically engaged chose to associate with likeminded peers while youth who were disengaged from school were likely to seek out peers who dismissed the value of education. Such work supports the ability of youth with pro-academic orientations to surround themselves with supportive friends even in the absence of a peer culture that emphasizes school engagement.

Using observations and interviews, Goldstein (2003) examined the role of peers in the development of social capital among language minority youth. Fifty-nine Chinese

students attending high school in a middle- to upper-middle class suburb of Toronto spoke about their school experiences and the ways in which they navigated educational demands. Peer networks provided a context for students to work through assignments and discuss questions in their native language. These collaborative interactions happened both within and outside the classroom in hallways, the cafeteria, and at home. Such peer support was facilitated by the teachers in the high school who designed activities and structured class time in ways that encouraged collaboration. Such supportive interactions also occur in urban, low socioeconomic contexts. Walker (2006) documented similar peer support among the high-achieving African American and Latino youth attending a high school in New York City. These students frequently cited friends as a major contributor to their success in math and described the ways in which peers from various contexts supported their achievement. Walker used the term “intellectual communities” to refer to the encouragement and academic assistance youth received from close friends, classmates, and peers outside the immediate school community. This support network motivated students to do well in school and provided a resource when students needed help with assignments.

Stokach (2006) specifically investigated the influence of peers on adolescents’ decisions to enroll in higher education. The post-secondary plans of the African American and Latino students in his sample were significantly affected by peers. Students whose friends intended to pursue higher education and who experienced high peer expectations for their own educational futures were ten times more likely to enroll in college than students who did not receive such support. Arbona and Nora (2007) found similar results in their study using data from the National Educational Longitudinal

Study. The researchers examined the college enrollment of 925 Latino youth who participated in the national study. Students whose friends also had high aspirations for college attendance and identified the importance of education were more likely to enroll in 4-year institutions than students who did not interact with academically oriented peers. The influence of peers extended to the college environment for these youth such that affiliation with academically oriented peers in high school predicted college degree attainment. The authors suggest that students may seek out peers with similar educational values throughout schooling in order to receive the support and encouragement they need for success.

Thus, previous work suggests that peers play an important role in the development of educational goals, values, and effort. Indeed, the growing importance of peers in adolescence demands attention. However, this increase in influence does not replace the important role of parents and teachers. Family members continue to shape adolescents' beliefs and goals while teachers are central to youths' academic lives. Early adolescents may rely on supportive adults more often than their older peers as they are still transitioning into this developmental stage. Drawing from ecological theory, peers in the present study are expected to exert their influence in concert with family members, teachers, and other school personnel. Further, this study tests the role of peers as a moderator between family support and college oriented outcomes as well as between teacher support and similar educational outcomes. It is expected that support from peers will enhance the influence of support from the family and from adults at school. On the other hand, a lack of such encouragement from peers could undermine the significance of supportive adults in other contexts.

## **Adolescent Agency and Educational Outcomes**

Research examining factors that contribute to academic achievement among adolescents highlights the important role of support, encouragement, and academic assistance from significant others (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). However, there is limited research investigating the role of the adolescent in accessing social support (Dika & Singh, 2001). Research suggests that significant others engage in a variety of activities that express their encouragement of academic achievement, but how do such activities originate? Is it the initiative of the parent, teacher, or friend or do adolescents seek out such support and guidance from others? According to Stanton-Salazar (2001), “people make their way in the world by constantly negotiating both the constraints placed on them and the opportunities afforded them by way of the social webs of which they are a part” (p.18). Indeed, research on agency suggests that adolescents have the capacity to influence their own achievement through various means including the solicitation of assistance from parents, teachers, and peers.

Defined as the ability to “influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances,” agency refers to the control individual’s have over their own lives (Bandura, 2006, p.164). In his work on human agency, Bandura (2001) describes the specific psychological processes that constitute agency. The foundation of agency is self-efficacy defined as, “personal judgments of one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals” (Zimmerman, 2000, 83). In order to engage in any of the psychological processes associated with agency, an individual must first believe that he or she will be able to successfully accomplish those actions. Individuals

enact agency through intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. Intentionality refers to an individual's commitment to engage in a future task while forethought constitutes the planning and strategies that the individual uses to complete the task. Self-reactiveness describes the way in which individuals manage unanticipated events that alter the course of the task and self-reflectiveness refers to the process of evaluating one's intentionality, forethought, and self-reactiveness once the task has been completed. It is through these psychological undertakings that individuals make choices within environments and exert influence over their lives (Bandura, 2006).

Research on academic self-efficacy, or the belief that that an individual will be capable of engaging in academic tasks, indicates that such attitudes are important predictors of a variety of educational outcomes (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Academic achievement, classroom engagement, effort, persistence, and subject matter interest are each impacted by a student's self-efficacy beliefs (Buriel et al., 1998; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Long et al., 2007; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). For example, in their sample of 358 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, Stevens and colleagues (2004) found that academic self-efficacy beliefs predicted academic achievement in mathematics across student ethnicity. Long and colleagues (2007) highlight the important role of self-efficacy beliefs in academic interest among African American eighth and ninth grade students. Those students across both grade levels who felt more efficacious reported higher levels of interest in academic subjects. Self-efficacy also predicted academic achievement in this sample. Students who reported high levels of efficacy had higher grade point averages than their less efficacious peers.

The influence of self-efficacy and agency extends beyond the classroom context to the development of future educational and career goals. Students choose future careers and plan for subsequent educational requirements based on perceptions of how successful they will be within those future positions (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Vittorio, & Pastorelli, 2001). Indeed, Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008) highlight the role of self-efficacy beliefs in African American adolescents' goals for the future. Students in their study who endorsed high levels of self-efficacy were more likely to report future educational aspirations and engage in behavior that would lead to the attainment of those educational goals. However, the relationship between self-efficacy and educational aspirations is not supported across ethnicity. The Mexican American high school students in a study by Flores, Navarro, and Dewitz (2008) reported future educational goals that were not predicted by their college self-efficacy scores, a scale that assessed the extent to which youth believed they were capable of engaging in college level work. Different measures of self-efficacy, assessments of the ability to complete current work versus beliefs regarding the ability to tackle college level work, may explain these inconsistent findings, but further research is needed in order to truly understand these ethnic variations.

The relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and academic outcomes may be explained by the mediating role of behaviors that align with the psychological processes of agency outlined by Bandura. In the context of classroom academic tasks, these processes are described as self-regulated learning. Students who set goals, engage in specific strategies to achieve those goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on the learning process after the goals are met are considered self-regulated learners (Boekaerts, 2006). Efficacious students set more challenging goals and are more likely to use learning

strategies such as rehearsal and self-consequences to attain those goals (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-efficacy predicted the use of academic strategies among the Latino students in a study conducted by Vick and Packard (2008). These high school students were more likely to use specific skills including monitoring their understanding of course content and making outlines of course material to help them study and prepare for class if they reported high levels of academic self-efficacy.

Efficacious students are also more likely to report engaging in self-monitoring while completing academic tasks which corresponds to the psychological process of self-reactiveness. In an ethnically diverse sample of ninth and tenth grade students, Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) found that self-efficacy beliefs across behavioral and performance domains predicted academic achievement. Specifically, students who believed they were capable of monitoring their work and devising solutions when they were faced with difficulties had higher grades than students who did not feel efficacious in their self-regulatory behavior. Finally, high levels of self-efficacy also predict self-evaluation of performance once the task has been completed which also aligns with self-reflectiveness (Zimmerman, 2000).

Unfortunately, less is known about the ways in which self-efficacy impacts educational aspirations and the mechanisms through which it exerts its influence. The literature concerning classroom self-regulation would suggest that students likely engage in similar psychological processes when developing and pursuing post-secondary goals, however, the adolescent's role in this process has been largely under-theorized. One reason for this omission in the literature may be the belief that individuals are more likely to engage in self-regulatory behaviors when goals are proximal (Schunk, 1990). Drawing

from previous research on goal setting and self-regulated learning, educational aspirations may be too distal to facilitate the use of planning, monitoring, and evaluating goal-directed behavior. However, cognitive advances in abstraction associated with adolescence may enable students to successfully develop more distal goals and regulate their actions towards achieving those goals. Such development targets the very behaviors that are associated with self-regulation such as planning, monitoring, and metacognition (Kuhn, 2009).

Research on extracurricular activities and community-based programs highlights the ways in which youth self-regulate their behavior in the pursuit of long-term goals. This work examines the development of strategic thinking, planning, and evaluation as adolescents engage in various organized activities (Gestsdottir et al., 2009). In their study of 2,280 eleventh grade students, Larson, Hansen, and Moneta (2006) found that students developed different aspects of self-regulation depending on the type of activity in which they were involved. Participation in athletics provided opportunities to develop initiative and emotional regulation. Arts activities also provided a context in which students learned initiative, while students in community-based and service activities broadened their social networks and learned how to manage the information and resources within these relationships. In another study, Larson and Hansen (2005) examined the development of strategic thinking in the context of a youth activism program. Adolescent participants described the ways in which they overcame challenges as they worked on a campaign regarding school suspensions for minor infractions. Students learned how to seek out important information from various constituents, create action plans for

corresponding goals, and generate possible road blocks and how to manage such situations.

In order to fully understand the development and pursuit of educational aspirations, research examining the ways in which adolescents engage in goal-directed behavior needs to be conducted. How do adolescents seek out information about college in order to establish postsecondary goals? Once these goals are solidified, how do adolescents manage information and resources designed to help them achieve those goals? Do adolescents engage in strategic actions indicative of self-regulation or is future educational attainment too distal, and therefore too challenging, a goal for adolescents to “handle”? The present dissertation aims to address these outstanding questions. The quantitative study investigates the impact of academic self-efficacy on students’ educational goals, values, and effort. It expands upon previous work through the examination of the ways in which self-efficacy may impact students’ access to support for college. Specifically, the relationship between self-efficacy and teacher support for college and the application process is explored. Student-teacher conversations about college may constitute adolescents’ strategic attempts to obtain important information that will influence their decisions about life after high school. The qualitative study explores adolescents’ agency and goal-directed behavior further through the examination of students’ specific strategies for learning about and pursuing higher education.

### **Dissertation Goals and Contributions**

The goal of the present dissertation is to foster a more complete understanding of the factors that promote educational attainment among Latino youth. Specifically, this dissertation investigates the ways in which Latino adolescents access information and

support from family members, teachers, and peers as they develop and pursue their educational aspirations, values, and school effort. This work makes three important contributions to the current literature. First, the study applies both social capital theory and an ecological framework, examining the roles of individuals from multiple contexts simultaneously. While the current literature highlights the importance of support across multiple social networks, most studies do so in isolation, focusing on one context at a time. Studies that do attend to the complementary roles of different individuals in students' lives examine the influence of social support on students' engagement and academic achievement in secondary school (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006; Murdock, 1999). For example, in an examination of the different sources of social support that influence academic engagement among Latina middle school students, Garcia-Reid (2007) found that teacher support was more predictive of students' interest and investment in education than family support or peer support. Woolley Kohl and Bowen (2009) also investigated the role of support from various individuals on middle school students' school behavior, school satisfaction, and academic achievement. In their study, teacher support mediated the relationship between family support and educational outcomes for Latino youth. Support from teachers also played a mediating role between peer support and school behavior and school satisfaction. Both of these studies used middle school samples and focused on the social aspects of support. It is still unclear how various individuals provide specific information and guidance concerning the college process and how such assistance impacts high school students' educational goals, values, and effort. Thus, the current study examines the support for college planning adolescents

receive from family, school, and peer contexts concurrently and the ways in which different sources of support produce different college orientations for students.

Second, the current study incorporates individual factors such as a student's own role in developing, accessing, and managing his or her social networks and the support garnered from these sources. Previous studies linking supportive contexts to educational outcomes position students in a passive role and ignore the ways in which student agency may contribute to the acquisition of assistance (Dika & Singh, 2001). The present study acknowledges the importance of student agency and investigates the ways in which adolescents themselves seek out the information, resources, and support they need for higher education.

Finally, the sample for my dissertation includes early adolescents in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Most research examining social capital and college access focuses on the social networks and experiences of high school juniors and seniors or current college students (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003) As a result, little is known about the ways in which supportive contexts impact the development of college awareness and access in the early grades when college aspirations and planning begin.

### **Quantitative Study Research Questions and Hypotheses**

As indicated above, numerous researchers have examined the ways in which family members, teachers, and peers support academic achievement and college trajectories for racial minority adolescents. However, such investigations typically focus on one source of support, examining the family, school, or peer group in isolation. Such an approach limits our ability to assess the ways in which multiple sources of support interact with one another to influence student outcomes. The first study fills this gap by

using quantitative methods to examine the ways in which multiple sources of support affect Latino students' college orientation (e.g. educational aspirations, educational expectations, educational value, and school effort). Adolescents' reports of the support they receive from family members, school personnel, and peers are considered simultaneously and the relative weights of these sources of support are investigated.

While there is limited research concerning the role of multiple supportive contexts in the development of high school youths' plans for future education, past work regarding the importance of different individuals in the academic lives of youth suggests that Latino adolescents may draw on multiple sources of support during this process. Informed by previous literature, each context of support is expected to play an important role in the development of adolescents' educational goals, values, and effort. Due to the importance of family members in the lives of all adolescents and Latino youth in particular, a strong relationship between college assistance from these individuals and students' college orientations is anticipated. Past work also demonstrates the critical role of teachers in students' academic lives. It is likely that the influence of teacher support extends beyond current performance in middle and high school to students' future educational plans. Thus, a significant relationship between teacher support for college and students' college orientations is also expected.

Previous research highlights the important role peers play in the development of educational goals and behaviors among older adolescents. The sample for the present study includes early adolescents in their first year of high school and the results are expected to demonstrate the beginning stages of peer importance during this time period. Support for college from peers is expected to be significantly related to students'

educational goals, values, and behavior. Peer support for college is also hypothesized to play a moderating role, either enhancing or limiting the support that students receive from family members and teachers.

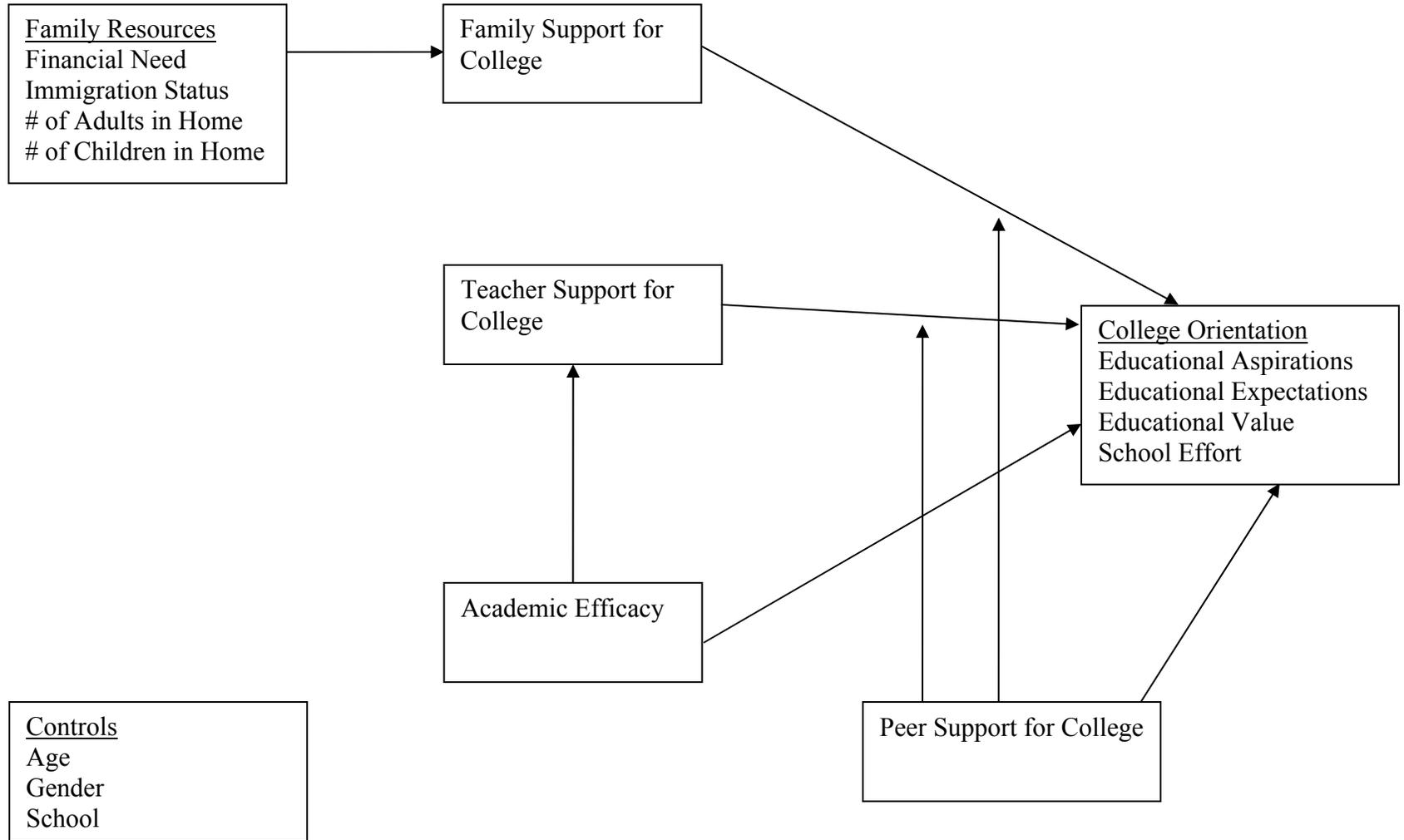
The quantitative study also examines the potential role of self-efficacy and the ways in which these beliefs impact students' college orientation. According to Bandura (2000), self-efficacy is the precursor to agency and drives individual action. Adolescents who feel efficacious are more likely to make plans, engage in behaviors that help them achieve their goals, and monitor progress. Thus, it is expected that self-efficacy will be significantly related to adolescents' educational goals, values, and effort. The relationship between self-efficacy and support students receive within the school context is also examined. Seeking support from others may be one strategy adolescents use to obtain their educational goals. Teachers and school staff are important sources of information regarding preparation for college and the college application process. It is anticipated that students' self-efficacy will be significantly related to reports of support and assistance from school personnel.

In order to address the aims stated above, the quantitative study examines the model depicted in Figure 1. The model highlights the hypothesized relationships between family resources, the support students receive from family, teachers, and peers, and the educational outcomes that result. The model is used to guide the following hypotheses:

1. Family resources associated with financial need, parental immigration status, number of adults living in the home, and number of children living in the home will be significantly associated with the amount of family support for college

provided to youth. Specifically, those parents who experience greater financial demands will engage in fewer discussions regarding college with their child.

2. Family support for college, teacher support for college, peer support for college, and students' self-efficacy beliefs will each exhibit a significant relationship with students' educational aspirations, expectations, school effort, and educational value such that more support and higher self-efficacy beliefs will lead to better educational outcomes.
3. Peer support for college is expected to moderate the relation between family support for college and educational outcomes as well as the relation between teacher support for college and educational outcomes. Having friends who talk about college and support youth in their postsecondary goals will enhance the influence of other forms of support while the absence of such peer support will inhibit the impact of other sources of support.
4. Academic self-efficacy will be significantly associated with teacher support for college. Students who perceive themselves as academically efficacious are expected to engage in discussions regarding college with school staff more frequently than students who are not as confident in their capabilities.



*Figure 1.* Hypothesized model showing peer support as a moderator of the relation between family support and educational outcomes and between teacher support and educational outcomes.

## **Qualitative Study Research Questions**

While quantitative methods provide the opportunity to assess how supportive contexts influence college orientation among many Latino adolescents generally, qualitative methods generate rich illustrations of such relationships. In order to fully understand the nuances of support for college and what that assistance entails, qualitative methods are needed. The present qualitative study continues to explore the ways in which family members, teachers, and peers provide support for college. In addition to the frequency with which such discussions and activities take place, this study examines the content of these conversations and their initiation in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews with 20 Latino youth provide examples of the support received, and the roles of different sources of support in students' own words. Further, the interviews highlight the ways in which such support contributes to adolescents' college knowledge and future plans.

Conversations with adolescents also provide the opportunity to learn more about students' own role in the college preparation process. Do they initiate discussions and activities in order to learn more about college? If so, when and how do they seek out such information? Do students who actively participate in the acquisition of information about college differ from students who do not? Does student initiative impact the support they receive from others? The interviews conducted begin to answer these questions through the exploration of adolescents' college aspirations, the people on whom they rely for support, and the ways in which they personally seek or do not seek out assistance. Identifying the various ways in which family members, teachers, and peers support college pursuits and the role of the adolescent in accessing such support may foster a

better understanding of the reasons why some Latino youth pursue a college education while others do not.

The qualitative study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do family members, teachers, and peers encourage Latino adolescents to develop and pursue plans for after high school?
- 2) Do family members, teachers, and peers discourage Latino adolescents from enrolling in higher education? Why?
- 3) How do adolescents seek, manage, and take advantage of their access to information and educational support about college attendance from different people in their lives?
- 4) Why do adolescents not take advantage of their access to supportive people and resources if such resources exist?

## **Chapter II**

### **Quantitative Study**

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

The sample consists of 223 Latino 9<sup>th</sup> graders attending three schools in the New England area. The sample includes 86 boys and 137 girls with a mean age of 14.54 (SD=.69). The majority of the students identified as either Puerto Rican or Dominican with most youth indicating that they were born in the United States (76%). Most of the parents of the students in the present sample, however, were born outside of the U.S. Eighty percent of mothers and 78% of fathers were born outside of the United States. The mean level of schooling for both mothers and fathers was a high school diploma. According to student reports mothers (29%) were more likely than fathers (16%) to pursue some form of post-secondary education. The background characteristics of the students in the present sample were similar across schools.

The sample was drawn from three schools, a parochial high school and two public high schools, located in disadvantaged, urban neighborhoods. The parochial high school enrolls 235 students all of whom must participate in an application process in order to be considered for admission. The school serves a well-established Latino community which is represented by the student body. Ninety-one percent of students report a Latino heritage and the school offers courses in Spanish for both native and non-native speakers. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the students that attend this school are also representative of the larger community. The average family income is \$33,700 and 85% of the student body is eligible for free or reduced lunch. Due to the financial hardships

experienced by students' families, students themselves contribute to 70% of their tuition costs through a mandatory internship program at the school. Students work at a local business one day a week in order to develop valuable work skills and supplement their tuition. With such a small student body, the school is able to provide extensive academic support and college counseling to students. As a result, the school boasted a graduation rate of 100% for the 2007-2008 school-year with all students pursuing some form of higher education. Students may participate in both teacher and peer-led tutoring sessions before or after school and all students are required to take a college preparatory curriculum. The school hosts several college fairs and offers SAT prep courses, financial aid workshops, and high school to college transition counseling for students.

The two public, comprehensive high schools serve much larger student bodies. Located in a brand new campus complex within the same city as the parochial school, one of these high schools is divided into 6 smaller, themed schools each with roughly 400-500 students. The students included in the present study attend two of these smaller programs, one that focuses on Health and Human Services and one that emphasizes Math, Science, and Technology. The Health and Human Services program enrolls 479 students in the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades, 91% of whom identify as Latino and 85% of whom are designated low-income by the state's metric of qualifying for free/reduced lunch, receiving TANF benefits, or qualifying for food stamps. The students enrolled in the Math, Science, and Technology program come from similar backgrounds. Four hundred and ninety-four students attend this program, 85% of whom identify as Latino and 85% of whom are designated as low-income. Both programs provide students with a core curriculum that is supplemented by project-based learning as well as internship

experiences within their respective subjects. While each program employs their own counselors, college counseling services are relatively uniform across the broader school community which has a graduation rate of roughly 55%. The high school works with College Board, an external vendor that provides a college counseling curriculum, support to teachers and administrators, and other college-going resources to participating schools.

The second public, comprehensive high school is located in another Northeastern city that is also home to a well-established Latino community. This school enrolls roughly 818 students, 71% of whom identify as Latino. The economic conditions of this community are similar to those of the other city represented in this sample with the majority of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The school is structured as a typical comprehensive public high school and the four school guidance counselors are assigned to students based on alphabetical categories of students' last names.

### **Procedure**

The data for the present study is part of a larger study examining the lives of Latino adolescents living in urban, poor neighborhoods. Once school approval was obtained, bilingual recruitment letters and consent forms were sent home with students at all three schools. Returned consent forms were collected by teachers and administrators at the schools and given to the researchers on the day of data collection. Students completed two self-report questionnaires, a demographic survey and an adolescent survey during the school day. Surveys were group administered at the schools and researchers were available to answer questions.

Students who wished to complete the surveys in Spanish were given copies that had been translated and back-translated into Spanish by native Spanish speakers. Before

beginning the questionnaires, students signed an assent form indicating their desire to participate in the study. Directions for each questionnaire were read aloud to students. The questionnaires took approximately 2 hours to complete, including several breaks. As a token of appreciation, the students received a \$30 gift certificate to a local movie theater when they handed in their questionnaires.

## **Measures**

**Demographic characteristics.** Students completed a demographic questionnaire that included a variety of questions regarding students' background. Several items from the survey are used in the present study both as independent variables and controls. Students reported on the number of children living in their home, the number of adults living in their home, and the name of the school they attended. Students also indicated their sex and reported whether their parents were born in the United States, both of which were dichotomously coded.

**Financial need.** In order to assess students' perceptions of family financial hardship, they were asked to respond to 8 items regarding the degree to which their family struggled to provide various resources. This scale was used by Parke and colleagues (2004) to examine economic stress among Latino families. Sample questions include, "My family has enough money to afford the kind of home we would like to have" and "My family has enough money to afford the kind of school supplies I need". Responses used a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .88.

**Family support for college.** These questions were adapted from questionnaire items included in the GEAR UP program evaluation survey (Finch & Cowley, 2003). This

scale includes six items that examine parental expectations for students' college attendance and how often students talked to their parents about attending college. Sample items include, "How often do you talk with any adults in your family about financial aid or scholarships for college?" and "How often does a family member encourage you to go to college?" Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .78.

**Teacher support for college.** These questions assessed the extent to which adolescents discuss aspects of the college application process with teachers and other adults at school. This scale was also based on questions included in the GEAR UP program evaluation survey (Finch & Cowley, 2003). Four items assessed how often students talked to school personnel about college, the requirements for college, and financial aid. Sample items include "How often do you talk with a teacher, school counselor, or someone else at your school about going to college?" and "How often does a teacher encourage you to go to college?" Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .81.

**Peer support for college.** This scale consisted of items measuring student-peer discussions about college adapted from the GEAR UP program evaluation survey (Finch & Cowley, 2003). It was comprised of five items that assess how often students talk to peers about going to college, how often they receive encouragement from peers, and how many of their peers are planning on attending college. Sample items include, "How often do you talk to a friend about the requirements for college?" and "How many of your friends are thinking about going to college?" Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .77.

**Academic self-efficacy.** Student reports of academic self-efficacy were obtained using items from the academic efficacy subscale of the Classroom Environment Scale (Moss & Trickett, 1987). Seven questions such as "If I have enough time, I can do a good

job on all my class work” and “I’m certain I can figure out how to do even the most difficult school work” assessed student beliefs concerning their ability to follow through with and master academic tasks. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .80.

**Educational aspirations.** Educational aspirations were measured with a single question asking students “How far would you *like to go* in school?” Students responded using a scale that ranged from 1 (Finish Some High School) to 5 (Graduate from Law, Medical, or Graduate School).

**Educational expectations.** Educational expectations were assessed with the question “How far do you *actually think you will go* in school?” Again, the response categories ranged from 1 (Finish Some High School) to 5 (Graduate from Law, Medical, or Graduate School).

**Educational values.** A measure of educational values developed by Fuligni, Witkow, and Garcia (2005) assessed students’ perceptions of the importance of academic achievement. The scale consisted of six items with response categories that range from 1 (Not at all Important) to 5 (Extremely Important). Sample items include “How important is it to you that you do well in school?” and “How important is it to you that you go to a good college after high school?” Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .86.

**School effort.** A measure of school effort was constructed based on items from Steinberg et al.’s (1992) classroom engagement scale. Six items that assessed student investment in school were used to assess school effort. Sample items include, “How often do you really pay attention in class?” and “How often do you hand in your homework on time?” Response categories range from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .73.

## **Results**

Students' survey responses were double coded and entered into SPSS 16.0. All analyses were conducted using this program.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

The survey used in this study went through several transformations during the data collection process. Specifically, items were added to the Peer Support for College scale between the first round of data collection and subsequent school visits. As a result, the students who participated in the first round of data collection have missing data for those items. As the scale is based on the average across items, this was not expected to affect the analyses and any difference would reflect a conservative estimate of the impact of peer support on the outcome variables. Analyses were run twice, once with the full sample (N=223) and once with only those participants who had complete data (N=177). Only one difference emerged between these analyses. When using the full sample, peer support for college was not a significant predictor of educational value; however, when the smaller sample is used it became significant. Thus, in order to maximize the power associated with a larger sample size, all analyses except for those associated with educational value use the full sample.

Prior to conducting the regression analyses, assumptions were checked by plotting residuals. With a sample size of over 200 participants, it was likely that normality tests would be significant. These tests (e.g. Kolmogorov-Smirnov) are conservative and not well suited for larger sample sizes. Plotting the residuals would be the best test of normality assumptions for this dataset. The residuals for each regression were normally

distributed. Thus, no transformations were performed and the regressions were completed with the original variables.

Analyses of Variance and correlations were then conducted to examine the influence of demographic background variables on predictor and outcome variables. These analyses identified background variables to be included as controls in later regression analyses. They also determined the interrelationships between variables and any potential problems with multicollinearity among predictor variables. Analyses of Variance were used to assess the influence of categorical background variables on predictor and outcome variables. Correlations were used to determine the relationship between a continuous background variable and the predictor and outcome variables.

The first Analysis of Variance examined the influence of school on predictor and outcome variables. Due to the differences in the educational experiences of students enrolled in the two career academies at the second high school, these academies were included as separate schools in study analyses. Differences among 4 schools were examined. This analysis revealed significant differences in predictor variables by school. Specifically, schools differed in students' reports of mother and father immigration status as well as family financial needs (all  $ps < .05$ ; see Table 1). School 1 (parochial school) ( $M = .05$ ,  $SD = .21$ ) enrolled significantly fewer students whose mothers were born outside the United States than School 3 (public school) ( $M = .19$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). Students attending School 1 ( $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .28$ ) were also less likely to have fathers who were born outside of the United States than School 3 ( $M = .26$ ,  $SD = .45$ ). In addition, students attending School 1 ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) reported significantly less financial strain than School 4 (public school) ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). No significant differences were found in outcome variables

by school. The second Analysis of Variance investigated the relationship between sex and predictor and outcome variables. No significant relationships were found between sex and predictor variables and one significant relationship was found between sex and school effort ( $p < .05$ , see Table 2). Girls ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) reported significantly higher levels of school effort than boys ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). As a result of these analyses, school and sex were controlled in subsequent regressions.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance of Study Variables by School

Predictor Variables	df	F	p
Mother US Born	3	11.41 ***	.000
Father US Born	3	4.19 **	.007
#Adults at Home	3	.59	.626
# Children at Home	3	.82	.696
Financial Need	3	.69*	.035
Family Support for College	3	332.85	.298
Teacher Support for College	3	2.37	.071
Peer Support for College	3	1.21	.307
Academic Self-Efficacy	3	.39	.759
Educational Aspirations	3	2.22	.087
Educational Expectations	3	.84	.473
Educational Value	3	.31	.817
School Effort	3	.56	.644

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 2

## Analysis of Variance of Study Variables by Sex

Predictor Variables	df	F	p
Mother US Born	1	.29	.593
Father US Born	1	.80	.374
#Adults at Home	1	.56	.455
# Children at Home	1	2.41	.122
Financial Need	1	1.07	.303
Family Support for College	1	.67	.404
Teacher Support for College	1	3.81	.052
Peer Support for College	1	.81	.368
Academic Self-Efficacy	3	.39	.759
Educational Aspirations	1	1.01	.316
Educational Expectations	1	2.16	.143
Educational Value	1	.03	.862
School Effort	1	5.60*	.019

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Correlation analyses included age, predictor, and outcomes variables. These analyses suggested that age was significantly related to mother immigration status (see Table 3). Thus, age was included as a control variable for subsequent regression analyses. None of the significant correlations had values above .70 indicating that all predictor and outcome variables measured independent constructs.

Table 3

## Correlations among Background, Predictor, and Outcome Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age	--	.18**	.13	.09	.07	.13	-.03	-.01	-.10	-.01	-.04	-.11	-.00	-.08
2. Immigrant Mother		--	.53**	.10	.03	.04	-.14*	-.06	-.25**	-.03	-.23**	-.19**	-.54*	-.20*
3. Immigrant Father			--	.06	-.14	.12	-.13	-.02	-.23**	-.17*	-.22**	-.24**	-.12	-.22**
4. # of Children in Home				--	.07	-.09	-.08	-.11	-.06	.03	-.01	-.06	.03	-.10
5. # of Adults in Home					--	-.14*	.05	.07	.03	.13	-.10	-.08	.04	.05
6. Material Need						--	-.17*	-.13	-.11	-.23**	-.15*	-.17*	-.15*	-.22**
7. Family Supp for Coll							--	.55**	.54**	.36**	.43**	.44**	.49**	.32**
8. School Supp for Coll								--	.49**	.26**	.18**	.29**	.29**	.23**
9. Peer Supp for Coll									--	.26**	.34**	.36**	.37**	.33**
10. Academic Self-Efficacy										--	.27**	.39**	.49**	.43**
11. Ed Aspirations											--	.70**	.44**	.35**
12. Ed Expectations												--	.41**	.39**
13. Ed Value													--	.51**
14. School Effort														--

## **Primary Analyses**

A separate set of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted for each of the study hypotheses corresponding to each stage of the model. The demographic background variables, age, sex, and school, were included in the first step of all regression analyses in order to control for their effects. A separate variable was created for each of the four schools in the study and these variables were dummy-coded in order to control for school in the regression analyses. The first regression analysis examined the hypothesis that family resource variables would predict the frequency with which youth engaged in discussions about college and received encouragement for college attendance from family members. Summarized in Table 4, this model was not significantly predictive.

Table 4

## Regression of Family Resources on Family Support for College

Predictor	Step 1		Step 2	
	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	$\beta$	SE $\beta$
Step 1				
Age	-.04	1.67	-.01	1.68
Sex	.05	2.42	.08	2.44
School 1	-.15	3.15	-.07	3.34
School 2	-.02	3.25	.05	3.33
School 3	-.02	3.07	.02	3.08
Step 2				
Immigrant Mother			-.13	3.15
Immigrant Father			.001	3.41
# of Children in Home			.04	.84
# of Adults in Home			-.08	.88
Material Need			-.18*	2.33
F	1.12		.09	
R <sup>2</sup>	.03		.08	
df	5		10	

\*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.01, \*\*\*p&lt;.001

The second regression analysis examined the relationship between students' academic self-efficacy beliefs and the frequency with which students receive support from school personnel with regards to college. Summarized in Table 5, self-efficacy had a significant relationship with teacher support for college ( $\beta = .25, p \leq .001$ ). Students who felt academically efficacious were more likely to report engaging in conversations about college with adults at school and receiving encouragement from these individuals.

Table 5

Regression of Academic Self-Efficacy on School Support for College

Predictor	Step 1		Step 2	
	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	$\beta$	SE $\beta$
Step 1				
Age	-.03	.08	-.03	.07
Sex	-.09	.11	-.08	.11
School 1	.14	.14	.13	.14
School 2	.14	.15	.13	.14
School 3	.11	.14	.11	.14
Step 2				
Academic Self-Efficacy			.25***	.07
F	1.75		3.97***	
R <sup>2</sup>	.04		.10	
df	5		6	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The third set of regression analyses investigated the hypothesis that support from multiple contexts as well as adolescents' own beliefs would be significantly related to educational outcomes. As is indicated in Table 6, the model examining the association between support for college, academic self-efficacy, and educational aspirations was significant and predicted 24% of the variance in students' educational goals. Specifically, family support for college ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ) and academic self-efficacy beliefs ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ) had significant relationships with educational aspirations while peer support for college and teacher support for college did not. The significant relationships were in the predicted direction with higher levels of family support and self-efficacy associated with higher educational aspirations.

The model predicting educational expectations was also significant and explained 28% of the variance. Again, family support for college ( $\beta = .24, p < .01$ ) and academic self-efficacy beliefs ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) emerged as significantly related to students' educational expectations while peer support for college and school support for college did not. Students who received high levels of support from family members and felt efficacious reported higher educational expectations.

The model predicting educational value was significant and explained 41% of the variance. This model used the smaller sample size with only participants who had complete data for the Peer Support for College scale. In this model, family support for college ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ) and academic self-efficacy beliefs ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ) were significantly related to students' assessments of the importance of education. Peer support for college ( $\beta = .16, p < .05$ ) also exhibited a significant association with student reports of educational value. Again, teacher support for college was not significant.

Finally, the model examining associations with school effort was significant and predicted 28% of the variance. In this model, peer support for college ( $\beta = .20, p < .01$ ) and academic self-efficacy beliefs ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) had significant relationships with school effort. Students who received support for college from their peers and felt efficacious were more invested in their school work and assignments than students who did not experience such support and doubted their academic efficacy. Family support for college and teacher support for college were not significant.

Table 6

## Regression of Support for College and Academic Self-Efficacy on College Orientation

Predictor Variables	Educational Aspirations (N=223)		Educational Expectations (N=223)		Educational Value (N=177)		School Effort (N=223)	
	$\beta$	SE B	$\beta$	SE B	$\beta$	SE B	$\beta$	SE B
Step 1								
Student's Age	-.04	.08	-.09	.10	-.02	.07	-.02	.07
Student's Sex	.08	.12	.11	.15	.06	.10	.14	.10
Student's School 1	-.16	.15	-.07	.19	.07	.14	-.01	.13
Student's School 2	.01	.16	-.01	.20	.07	.14	-.06	.14
Student's School 3	-.06	.15	-.06	.19	.01	.14	-.01	.13
F	1.46		1.15		.22		1.20	
R <sup>2</sup>	.03		.03		.01		.03	
Df	5		5		5		5	
Step 2								
Student's Age	-.10	.07	-.06	.09	.02	.05	.00	.06
Student's Sex	.04	.11	.10	.13	.02	.08	.13*	.09

	Ed Aspirations	Ed Expectations	Educational Value	School Effort				
Student's School 1	-.09	.14	-.04	.17	.09	.11	-.00	.12
Student's School 2	.01	.15	-.04	.17	.02	.11	-.09	.12
Student's School 3	-.02	.14	-.06	.16	.00	.11	-.00	.11
Family Support	.35***	.00	.24**	.01	.35***	.00	.11	.00
Teacher Support	-.12	.09	.04	.10	-.09	.06	.04	.07
Peer Support	.15	.00	.14	.01	.16*	.00	.20**	.00
Academic Self-Efficacy	.14*	.08	.24***	.10	.37***	.06	.32***	.07
F	7.24***		8.84***		12.81***		9.03***	
R <sup>2</sup>	.24		.28		.41		.28	
Df	9		9		9		9	

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\*p≤.05, \*\*p≤.01, \*\*\*p≤.001

The fourth set of regression analyses examined the role of peer support as a moderator of the relationships between family support for college and educational outcomes and between school support for college and educational outcomes (see Table 7). Before conducting the regressions, variables were centered and interaction terms for Family Support for College X Peer Support for College and School Support for College X Peer Support for College were computed. The centered variables and the interaction terms were then entered into a regression with age, sex, and school as controls. The first model examining the association with educational aspirations was statistically significant and explained 30% of the variance. Family support for college ( $\beta = .31, p < .001$ ), Academic self-efficacy ( $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ), and the interaction between family support for college and peer support for college ( $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ ) were each significantly related to educational aspirations. Peer support for college moderated the relationship between family support for college and educational aspirations in the predicted direction with high levels of friend support enhancing family support for college and low levels dampening the effect of family support (see Table 7). However, a graph of this model suggests that the interaction effects were not practically significant (see Figure 2). Such effects began at the high end of the educational aspirations scale and thus did not differentiate youth in their educational goals.

The model examining the relationship with educational expectations was also significant and explained 33% of the variance. Again, academic efficacy ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ), family support for college ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ), and the interaction between family support for college and peer support for college ( $\beta = -.21, p < .01$ ) were significantly associated with students' educational expectations. The influence of the interaction effect

of Family Support for College X Peer Support for College on educational expectations was similar to its influence on educational aspirations. High levels of peer support for college enhanced the effect of family support for college on educational expectations and low levels of peer support inhibited the impact of family support for college on educational expectations (see Table 7). The moderation effect was most pronounced at the highest levels of both family support for college and peer support for college. However, also similar to the previous results, the interaction effects did not prove to be practically significant. Such effects did not differentiate youth in their educational expectations (see Figure 3).

The model examining educational value was significant; however, neither interaction term emerged as a significantly related to educational value. The model explained 42% of the variance and academic efficacy ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ) and family support for college ( $\beta = .33, p < .001$ ) were significantly associated with educational value. Students who felt efficacious and who received high levels of support from their family believed doing well in school and getting a good education were important (see Table 7).

The model examining school effort was also significant and predicted 29% of the variance. Similar to the previous model, the two interaction terms were not significant in this model. Peer support for college ( $\beta = .20, p < .01$ ) and academic efficacy ( $\beta = .32, p < .001$ ) were the only variables demonstrating significant associations with students' school effort. Students who received support for college from peers and reported high levels of self-efficacy invested more time and energy into their schoolwork (see Table 7).

Table 7

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting College Orientation from Support from Family, Teachers, and Peers and Academic Self-Efficacy

Predictor	College Orientation							
	Ed. Aspirations		Ed Expectations		Educational Value		School Effort	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.034		.03		.01		.03	
Control Variables <sup>a</sup>								
Step 2	.208***		.28***		.41***		.26***	
Family Support for College		.35***		.24**		.35***		.12
Teacher Support for College		-.12		.04		-.09		.04
Peer Support for College		.15		.14		.16*		.20**
Academic Self-Efficacy		.14*		.24***		.37***		.32***
Step 3	.056***		.33**		.01		.004	
Family Support for College		.31***		.20*		.33***		.10
Teacher Support for College		-.09		.08		-.08		.03
Peer Support for College		.10		.09		.14		.20**
Academic Self-Efficacy		.14*		.24***		.37***		.32***
Family Support X Peer Support		-.31***		-.21**		-.09		-.01
Teacher Support X Peer Support		.12		-.02		.00		.09
Total $R^2$	.30***		.33***		.42***		.29***	
df	11		11		11		11	
<i>n</i>	223		223		177		223	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> control variables include age, sex, and school

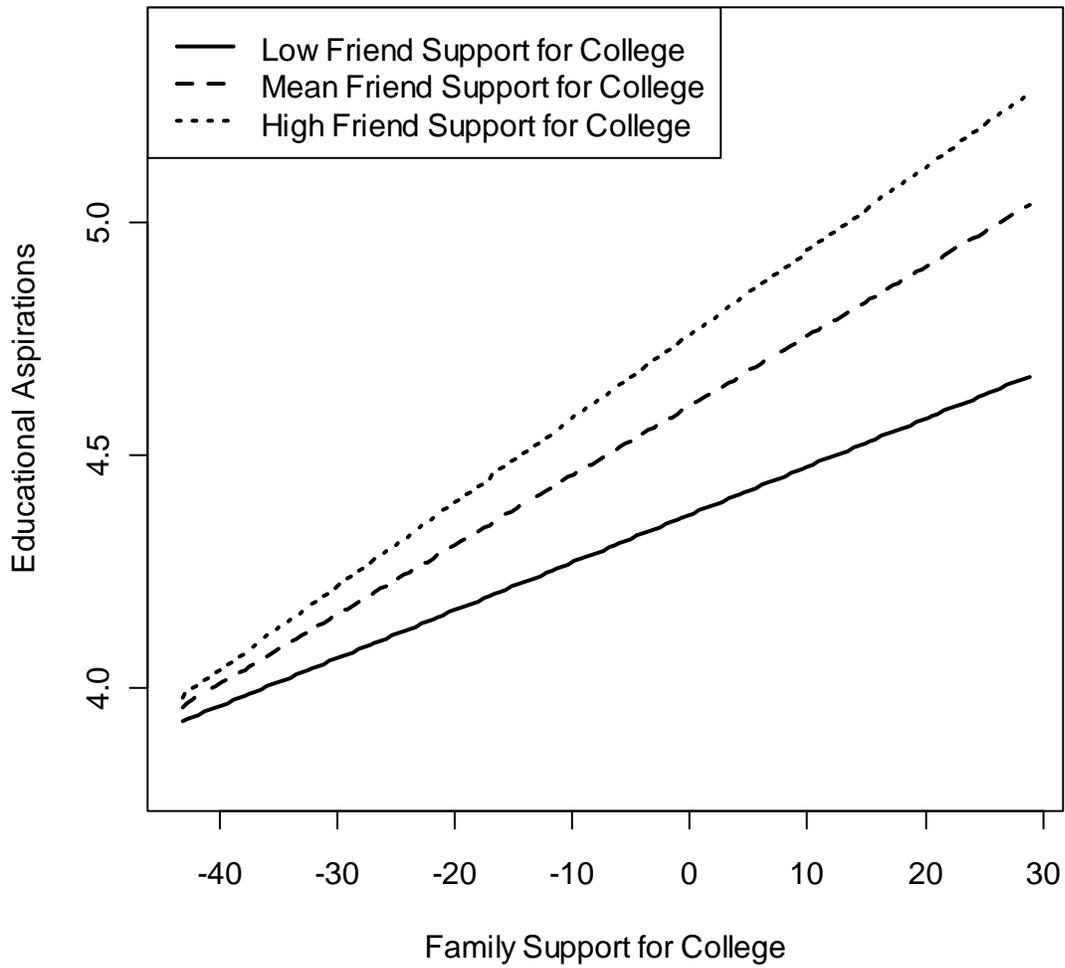


Figure 2. Summary of Family Support for College X Peer Support for College interaction predicting educational aspirations.

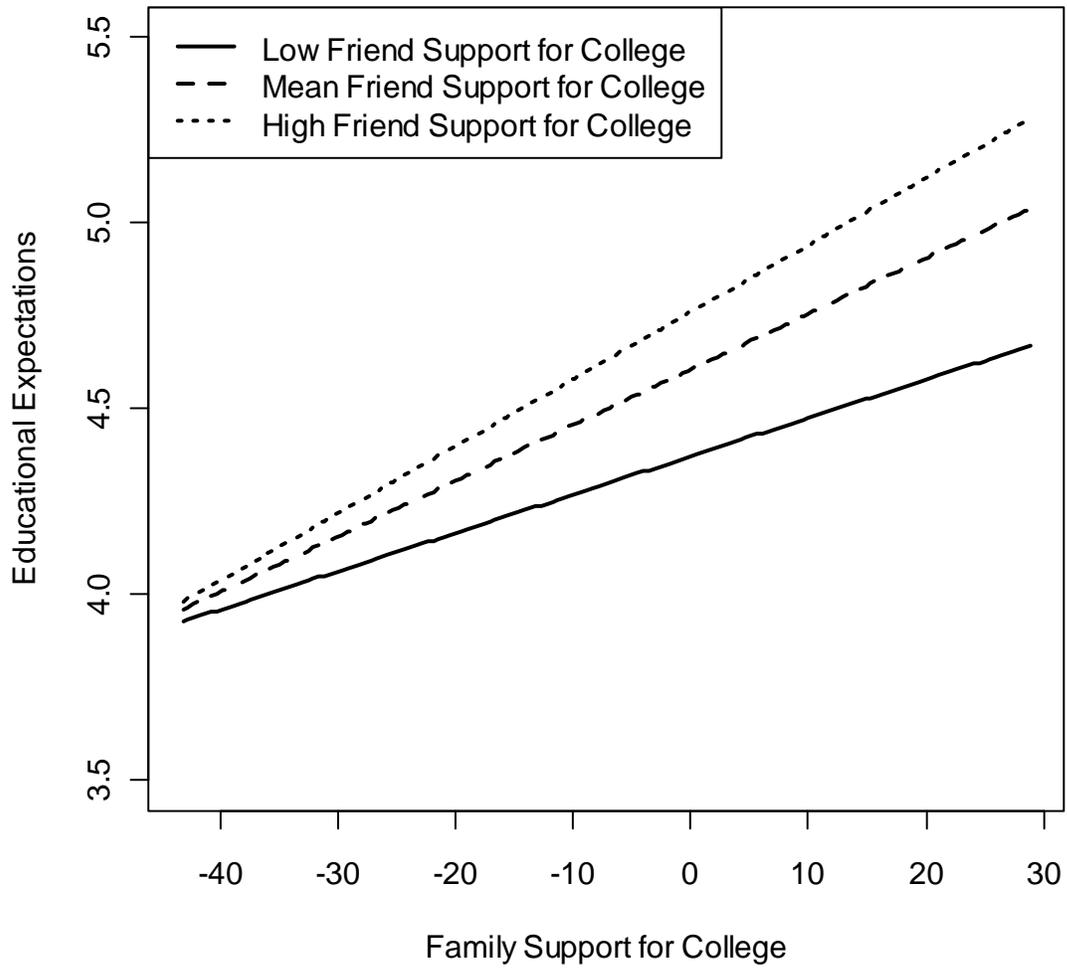


Figure 3. Summary of Family Support for College X Peer Support for College interaction predicting educational expectations.

## Discussion

Findings from the quantitative study suggest that the support students receive from significant others is an important predictor of their college plans. Furthermore, certain sources of support assumed different roles in students' orientation towards higher education. Corroborating the results of previous studies, the support students received from family members influenced the development of their educational goals and fostered the value of education (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007). Students who reported high levels of family support for college were more likely to have high educational aspirations, educational expectations, and educational values than their peers who did not receive such support at home.

The primacy of support from the family context reflects Latino cultural values and the importance of family ties among this population. Latino parents strive to develop and nurture relationships with their children that are characterized by high levels of communication and warmth (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). Such supportive relationships provide environments that foster the discussion of educational goals and the importance of educational attainment. In addition, the value of *familismo* among Latino adolescents may implicitly encourage youth to adhere to parents' educational expectations. In a study examining Latino adolescents' perceptions of parental authority, Alvarez (2007) found that these youth endorsed the legitimacy of parental control and rule making at much higher rates than previous studies with European American and African American samples. Such rules and obligations may apply to the context of education with Latino youth adopting parental educational values and expectations.

While the support students received from parents was influential in the development of educational goals, peer support was more predictive of the daily academic behaviors that turn those aspirations into a reality. Students who talked with their friends about college and received encouragement from their friends were more likely to invest time and effort in their schoolwork than students who did not get this type of support. These findings are similar to those of Steinberg and colleagues (1995) who found that parental support for academics influenced educational plans while support from peers impacted daily school behaviors such as homework completion and studying for exams. The relationship between peer support and school effort may be explained through its impact on competing demands for adolescents' time and energy. Students who are surrounded by peers who support and encourage their academic pursuits may experience less pressure by friends to engage in disruptive behavior in class and to neglect homework or studying in order to socialize. This is supported by previous research that demonstrates the significant relationship between friend's behavior at school with students' own school behavior (Crosnoe, Cavanaugh, & Elder, 2003; Masten, Juvonen, & Spaztier, 2009; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). In their study of Latino middle school youth, Woolley and colleagues (2009) found that students who reported having friends who cut class, misbehaved in school, and received frequent suspensions for misconduct were more likely to engage in these disruptive behaviors themselves.

Having friends who encourage college attendance may also foster pro-academic behaviors among peer groups. Frequent discussions about and support for college attendance from friends may be accompanied by academic assistance. Students may work together on school assignments, encourage each other to stay focused in school, and

create the type of learning communities Goldstein (2003) and Walker (2006) describe in their examinations of Asian and African American youth. Indeed, students who receive encouragement from friends to go to college and talk with them about the college application process may feel pressure to conform to behavioral norms that lead to achievement. Thus, the importance of peer support for college on school effort may reflect the absence of pressure to engage in disruptive behavior as well as the promotion of academically oriented behavior.

Both family support for college and peer support for college were related to students' beliefs in the importance of education. The influence of both sources of support on this aspect of college orientation reflects the significance of family and peers during this developmental stage. Previous research highlights the emergence of the peer network as a salient influence in adolescents' lives as they search for independence from the family unit (Brown & Larson, 2009). However, the importance of peers does not completely overshadow the relationships youth have with family members and adolescents continue to seek support and guidance from parents, siblings, and extended kin (Laursen & Collins, 2009). According to the present findings, youth draw on the support they receive from both family members and peers in order to construct values around the importance of education and academic achievement.

Interested in the ways in which different sources of support may impact one another, the present study examined the interaction between family support for college and peer support for college. While this interaction effect was statistically significant, it was not practically significant. Such findings suggest that both family members and peers exert strong and independent influences on students' college orientation. Instead of

working in concert to promote the same components of college orientation, family support for college and peer support for college make unique contributions to students' preparation for higher education.

The hypotheses concerning the influence of teacher support for college on college orientation were not supported by the results of the current study. Students' conversations with school staff and the encouragement they received regarding future college attendance was not a significant predictor of any of the educational outcomes. This finding is particularly surprising in light of previous work which finds support from adults at school to be more predictive of students' educational experiences than other sources of support (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). The measure of teacher support used in the present study differs from ones used in previous research in its emphasis on discussions and support specifically related to college. Prior work examining the influence of teacher support on educational outcomes has examined teacher social support and academic support related to current coursework (e.g. Croninger & Lee, 2001). In these studies, students are asked to indicate whether they believe their teachers care about them, want them to do well in school, and are available to discuss personal problems. In contrast, the measure used in the current investigation asks students to report on the frequency with which they engage in conversations with school staff about the requirements for college, financial aid for college, and other aspects of the college-going process. This measurement difference may explain why the results for the present study differ from those of past investigations.

The current results, in combination with those of previous work, suggest that the type of support students receive from school staff may impact the educational outcomes

that result. The type of support examined here (e.g. conversations about college) may be a better predictor of students' college choice and eventual attainment than the development of their aspirations and expectations. Indeed, research examining the role of support from teachers and counselors during the college application process highlights the important contributions these individuals make at this stage of students' educational planning and decision-making (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2003; Reid & Moore, 2008). This source of support may not exert its influence until later in a student's college-going process.

In addition to highlighting the ways in which support from significant others impacts educational outcomes among Latino youth, the findings of the present study suggest that students' own beliefs are a powerful contributor to their college orientation. Students' perceptions of their ability to successfully engage in and complete academic tasks influenced their goals, values, and behaviors. Efficacious students reported higher educational aspirations and expectations. They also had more confidence in the importance of doing well in school and engaged in behaviors that supported these beliefs.

These results support and extend previous findings that link students' self-efficacy with future educational plans and the behaviors that lead to academic success (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008; Linenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). They contribute to the literature concerning the ways in which self-efficacy beliefs operate within Latino student populations, contradicting previous work that suggests these beliefs do not influence future educational goals (Flores, Novarro, & DeWitz, 2008). Such conflicting results suggest the importance of attending to the domain specificity of self-efficacy, a factor theorists describe as critical in the examination of self-efficacy and educational

outcomes (Schunk, 1990; Zimmerman, 2000). Flores and colleagues investigated the role of college self-efficacy, or students' beliefs that they will be able to complete college-level work in the future, on educational goals while students in the present study reported on their academic self-efficacy for high school work. Students may base their educational aspirations on current feelings of efficacy rather than estimations of future capabilities in college. Students may feel confident in their abilities to successfully complete high school level work but report mixed levels of college self-efficacy as they are unfamiliar with the demands and expectations of college level work. This may be particularly true for Latino students if their parents have not attended college in the United States. Thus, students may develop future educational goals based on current levels of academic functioning and assume that these capabilities will continue in the future when they have more information concerning what is required of them.

These results also begin to explore the influence that adolescents exert over the support they receive during the development of their educational plans. Self-efficacy was associated with school support for college, indicating that students who felt more efficacious engaged in conversations about college with school staff more frequently than their peers. Students who believe they can successfully approach and complete academic tasks may take more initiative in seeking out information and resources about college. Previous findings within the domain of positive youth development programs suggest that the capacity of adolescents to strategize and organize actions in the pursuit of goal attainment increases during this developmental stage (Larson & Hanson, 2005; Lerner & Barton, 2000). The results of the present study suggest the college process is one context in which adolescents engage in this type of agentic behavior and make use of their

developing skills. However, it is not possible to prove causality and students who engage in conversations with teachers may subsequently feel more efficacious. Indeed, it is likely that this is a circular process with support enhancing efficacy and efficacy increasing the frequency of supportive interactions.

**Implications.** The results of the quantitative study have numerous implications for the ways in which individuals interested in increasing college attendance among Latino youth can target their efforts. One point of intervention is the engagement of parents and family members in the preparation and support of educational goals. These individuals were significantly related to students' aspirations, expectations, and values for college indicating that they are an important source of support during the college process. Ensuring that they have the information and resources to successfully help their children through the college process could bring Latino youth closer to reaching their dreams of attending higher education. Many parents of Latino youth may be unfamiliar with the American educational system and may not have a firm understanding of the college process. Providing these individuals with specific information regarding the requirements for college, the college application process, and various options for financing post-secondary education would increase the number of individuals in a position to assist Latino youth during this process.

Fann, Jarksy, and McDonough (2009) provide insight concerning ways to structure effective college activities for Latino parents in their study of college information workshops provided through a school-university partnership. The researchers highlight the importance of making parents feel welcome and supported during these activities in order to ensure sustained participation. In order to achieve this goal,

information about upcoming workshops was disseminated using a variety of strategies including parent networks, materials were provided in Spanish, and the workshops including the opportunity for parents to voice their concerns and questions about the college process. Parents were eager to learn more about college and arm themselves with the information they needed to better assist their children in achieving their educational aspirations. They appreciated the opportunity to become involved in the workshops and were determined to make use of the information they gained in the future as they guided their children towards higher education. Thus, when leveraged, parents can be an important resource for programs dedicated to increasing college enrollment among Latino youth.

The current findings also suggest that peers should be incorporated into efforts to increase college attendance among Latino youth. Increasing the encouragement students receive from peers has the potential to impact their behavior in school, their attention in class, and the amount of studying they do. College advisory groups and clubs may foster college discussions that motivate students to work hard in school. Such groups establish a formal venue for students to engage in discussions regarding their futures and access the support they need during the planning process. They also provide a context for youth to discuss these issues with their peers. Peer tutoring and college counseling activities may also connect youth with other students who can provide encouragement and assistance as they work to achieve their educational goals. The work of Tierney and Venegas (2006) highlights the potential of formal peer mentoring programs targeted at improving college access among youth. Their study of one such program at a large, urban high school indicated that participation was beneficial not only for students who received assistance

but for the peer mentors themselves. The adolescent counselors gained access to important information and resources through one-on-one time with school college counselors and were successful in forwarding this information to peers. All of these practices help create a culture within a school that emphasizes college attendance and provides the support students need to prepare for those goals.

The findings relating to the significance of the interaction between family support for college and peer support for college on college orientation highlights the complexity of examining educational goals among youth in today's society. Most of the students in the present study reported high levels of educational aspirations and expectations. Likely aware of the value and importance of a college degree in today's economy, students wanted and planned to enroll in higher education. Previous research examining students' educational aspirations and eventual college enrollment suggests that most youth in the United States aspire to high levels of education and such goals may not differentiate those youth who eventually enroll in post-secondary education from those who do not (Roderick, 2006). Expanding upon this work, the results of the present study indicate that what may distinguish youth is their knowledge of professional opportunities and the graduate work required to pursue those careers. The current work also suggests that peer support may play a unique role in providing knowledge about and encouragement for graduate school. The benefits students accrue from receiving high levels of support for college from both family members and peers may be their access to information and resources regarding professional degrees.

The current study also presented important findings concerning the relationship between students' beliefs about their ability to complete academic tasks and their college

orientation. Such results suggest that increasing students' confidence in this area may also increase their educational goals, values, and investment. Efforts to improve self-efficacy may target both course content as well as students' approach to learning and completing school work. Academic advising and tutoring may be important venues where adults can assist students in mastering subject matter, address student misconceptions, and provide the opportunity for students to ask questions that further their understanding. These activities may also provide important support as youth develop the skills and strategies that will help them complete their work. This is particularly salient among the age group included in the present study. As freshman, these youth are still in the process of learning the expectations and standards of high school level work. Explicit training in study skills, time management, and organization may increase adolescents' knowledge of how to go about tackling academic assignments at this stage of their educational careers. This increased knowledge would likely contribute to students' academic self-efficacy.

**Limitations and future directions.** While the present study makes an important contribution to the current literature regarding the preparation of Latino youth for higher education, further research needs to be conducted in order to gain a full understanding of how to support students' educational aspirations. Additional work concerning the nature of college preparation at this stage of schooling as well as the types of support that are required needs to be completed. The present study focused on youth's college orientation which was comprised of their aspirations, expectations, values, and effort. It is possible that the successful pathway to college includes other factors that were not addressed here. Should youth also be actively engaged in activities that provide information about college? Should they have a basic knowledge of higher education and the college

application process? Future work should continue to explore the factors that predict college enrollment and what students need to do to ensure their college trajectories during the early years of high school.

An important next step in the examination of Latino adolescents' pathways to college would be the use of longitudinal designs in order to identify causal relationships. The study presented here uses a cross-sectional design and without longitudinal data it is impossible to determine causality. Another limitation of the current study that may be addressed by future work is the exploration of ethnic group comparisons among Latinos. The Latino label encompasses many different nationalities, each with their own traditions, values, and beliefs. The current sample size did not permit the investigation of such comparisons but it would be critical for future work to attend to possible ethnic group differences in students' educational outcomes.

In addition to addressing study limitations, future research should also build upon the findings of this work. For example, the lack of a significant relationship between school support for college and college orientation in the present study deserves further examination. This finding is inconsistent with previous work and requires replication in future studies. The construction of the current teacher support for college scale may explain this finding. The scale used in this study measured the frequency with which youth engaged in conversations with teachers, counselors, and school staff regarding various college topics. It did not, however, assess the nature of those conversations. It is possible that youth frequently discuss college topics with school personnel but these discussions include negative messages that discourage youth from pursuing higher education. Future work should address this limitation and include a measure of teacher

support for college that accounts for the various types of messages youth may receive during conversations at school.

Finally, the role of self-efficacy and agency in students' access to the support they receive at school must be explored further. Given the goals of the present study and the interest in examining how youth might be involved in their college preparation process, the present analyses focused on the ability of self-efficacy to predict the support students receive from adults in the school community. However, it is likely that this relationship is bi-directional. Youth may initiate conversations with teachers and counselors in their quest for information about college, but the support that they receive from these individuals may influence their decision to rely on school staff for assistance. It will be important for future work to assess the bi-directional nature of this relationship and the ways in which school support influences self-efficacy.

## **Chapter III**

### **Qualitative Study**

#### **Method**

##### **Participants**

The study sample includes twenty 9<sup>th</sup> grade students attending a public, comprehensive high school located in an poor, urban community in the Northeast. The sample was evenly split in regards to sex with 10 females and 10 males participating in the study. While all students were enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the students ranged from 14 to 17 years in age with a mean age of 14.45. School records indicated that these students self-identified as Latino and during the interviews students reported eight different Latino ethnicities including Puerto Rican (8 students), Dominican (3 students), and Brazilian (2 students). Eleven of the students were second generation, born in the United States to immigrant parents. Five of the students were immigrants themselves and 3 students were third generation. One student was born outside of the United States to one U.S.-born parent and one non-U.S. born parent. Specific demographic characteristics of the sample are listed in Table 8. Pseudonyms are used in place of the students' real names.

Table 8. Student Background Characteristics

Student	Age	Ethnicity	Immigration Status	# of Siblings	# Ppl in Home	House
<b>College-Informed</b>						
Anita	14	Honduran	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	1	4	Magnet
Karen	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	1	4	Magnet
Carlos	14	Ecuadorian	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	2	5	A
Juan	15	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	3	2	A
Lara	17	Brazilian	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	2	5	B
Anna	14	Dominican	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	3	4	C
<b>Academically-Focused</b>						
Daniel	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	3	2	A
Hector	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	7	7	Magnet
Maria	14	Uruguayan	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	0	3	A
Esmeralda	14	Cape Verdean	1.5 Generation	3	2	C
Peter	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	3	3	C
Guillermo	14	Peruvian	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	3	6	A
<b>Struggling</b>						
Marc	15	Portuguese	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	0	3	C
Suzana	14	Brazilian	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	3	5	B
Jenny	14	Dominican	1 <sup>st</sup> Generation	1	3	Magnet
Raymond	16	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	1	6	A
Gloria	14	Costa Rican	2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation	3	5	Magnet
Felipe	16	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	2	5	A
Gladys	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	9	5	A
Jose	14	Puerto Rican	Mainland Born	2	9	B

All students attended a school that was the largest of three high schools in the district, enrolling roughly 2,000 students during the 2009-2010 school year. In order to create a more personalized environment for students, the school is divided into five houses or small schools-within-a-school. Each house includes its own faculty and staff and is operated as a separate learning community. Students are sorted into four of the houses based on the alphabetical order of their last names while the fifth house contains a magnet program for students within the district. Students in the present study attended the magnet program and three of the other four houses. The omission of the fifth house was not by design but reflects a lack of response on the part of the students enrolled in that house. House A serves roughly 130 students and has one counselor on staff. House B enrolls 409 students and this learning community provides two counselors to assist its students. House C enrolls 425 students and employs three counselors. The Magnet House is the largest house within the high school and enrolls 664 students. To account for this increase in student population, the Magnet House has three counselors on staff.

### **Instrument**

At the beginning of the interview, students completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Each student reported his or her age, grade, ethnicity, generational status, number of siblings, and number of people living in their home. The questionnaire also included three questions regarding their access to college information. Students reported if they had ever requested information about college from their house's guidance offices, if they had ever visited a college campus, and if they believed they knew what they needed to do in order to get into college. Once students completed the demographic questionnaire, the researcher began the semi-structured interview. Students discussed the

different sources of support for college attendance in their lives and the conversations and interactions they have with these individuals about the college application process. The students were probed to give examples and provide more detail to illustrate their comments. Students were allowed to discuss issues not directly related to the interview question in order to provide more information concerning their general educational experiences and in some cases the researcher pursued these topics in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which students perceived their academic lives. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

### **Procedure**

Twenty-five adolescents, roughly 6 students from each house, were randomly selected to receive a personal invitation to participate in the study. The researcher gave a brief announcement to these students during the school day and distributed recruitment letters and consent forms. An announcement was made to ten additional students during the course of the project to ensure equal numbers of students from each house. Once students returned their consent forms and parental permission was obtained, the researcher completed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 adolescents individually. These interviews took place during November and December of 2009 and all but two were conducted in an unoccupied room within the magnet program's central office. The remaining interviews were completed in the school auditorium while the magnet office was in use. The researcher scheduled the interviews with the assistance of the school's administrative assistant in order to ensure that the students did not miss any academic classes. Once the interviews were scheduled, students received a note from the

high school's central office and met the researcher in the interview room. Interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes in order to accommodate the school schedule. As a token of appreciation for their participation, students were given a \$20 gift card to a local store or movie theater at the conclusion of the interview.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

The researcher used a grounded theory framework to guide the analysis of students' responses including both deductive and inductive coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analysis process followed guidelines suggested by Dey (1999) for the analysis of qualitative data. This process begins with (1) generating concepts (2) integrating concepts into categories (3) delimiting categories along properties and dimensions of concepts and (4) identifying connections to emerging theory. In order to generate concepts, the researcher read through each interview transcript and created a narrative summary for each of the students who participated in the study (Way & Pahl, 1999). These summaries enabled the researcher to get a sense of the support students received for college and the ways in which they learned about aspects of the college application process. Guided by the research questions presented in Chapter 1, the researcher then used the summaries to identify key themes and generate a list of concepts that reflected students' comments and experiences. Initial concepts included college talk, college activities, academic assistance, academic monitoring, personal resourcefulness, and misinformation. These concepts began to unpack the research questions previously presented for this study:

- 1) How do family members, teachers, and peers encourage Latino adolescents to develop and pursue plans for after high school?

- 2) Do family members, teachers, and peers discourage Latino adolescents from enrolling in higher education? Why?
- 3) How do adolescents seek, manage, and take advantage of their access to information and educational support about college attendance from different people in their lives?
- 4) Why do adolescent not take advantage of their access to supportive people and resources?

The interview transcripts were then read a second time and the concepts were elaborated, revised, and organized into more specific codes. This process also contributed to the development of categories that integrated concepts based on properties and dimensions. Through this process it became clear that the individual responsible for initiating college conversations and activities was an important aspect of students' access to information about college. Furthermore, the content of these interactions as well as they way they took place emerged as important concepts. Thus, the final list of codes reflected the broad categories of initiative and the concepts of content and process.

Student Initiative – Students sought out assistance and initiated conversations in order to learn more about what college is like and the college application process (**for information**). In order to get this information, students chose a source of support based on the likelihood that the individual would have the information they needed (**knowledge**) or because the individual had offered them help in the past (**offered help**). Students also sought out support when they had concerns about college (**college concerns**).

Parent Initiative – Parents initiated conversations with their children about college in many different ways. Some conversations focused on the need to go to college in order to be successful in the future and were directed towards the importance of higher education (**future planning**). Other discussions were prompted by reactions to students' current performance and the need to do well in order to make it to college (**current performance**). Finally, several parents were engaged in the college process themselves and conversations and activities were initiated as a result of parents' own educational activities (**modeling**).

Three additional codes were also generated to reflect the support students received from peers as well as their familiarity with the college preparation process.

College Encouragement from Peers – Students described various ways in which their friends supported their college pursuits.

Peers' Plans: Students also reported on their friends plans for after high school and how those plans influenced their own post-secondary goals.

Misinformation – This concept was carried over from the initial list of themes in order to reflect students' understanding of the college preparation process as well as the barriers that prohibited them from correcting their misconceptions.

Once the list of codes was finalized, the researcher read the interview transcripts a third time and conducted a line-by-line analysis of students' responses using NVivo. Finally, matrices were used to compare students across concepts and categories and identify patterns regarding students' preparation for college (Patton, 2002). This comparison resulted in the formation of three groups of students based on their experiences with student-, family-, and teacher-initiated college conversations and

activities. College-Informed students described high levels of all three types of initiation. Academically-Focused students reported high levels of family- and student-initiated discussions and medium levels of teacher-initiated conversations. In addition, the content of the discussions and activities in which these youth were engaged differed from the College-Informed group. Struggling students reported low levels of all types of initiative. There were no differences across the three groups on the demographic variables as indicated in Table 8. More detailed descriptions of these groups are provided in the following section.

### **Findings**

The goal of the qualitative study was to explore the ways in which Latino youth learn about college and access support for higher education from the people in their lives. All of the students interviewed had high educational aspirations and wanted to go to college. They knew that college was important for professional success and future financial security. For instance, Jenny reported that she wanted to go to college because she wanted to do better financially than her parents. “Well I don't want to be like my parents. I want to have a lot of money, I don't want to struggle. And I want to have money for my family.” When asked how he decided to pursue college after high school, Daniel emphasized the importance of financial security. He said, “Mmm I just like didn't want to be like everybody else on the street. Like get a good job later in the future.” Jenny, Daniel, and many of the other students interviewed saw college as the key to social and economic mobility and had high educational aspirations because of this benefit. Students also suggested that education contributed to their personal development. They viewed college as an opportunity to learn and reach their potentials. The response

from Felipe illustrates this value of higher education. In stating why he would like to go to college, he said, “To be somebody, to have a better future. To obtain myself, to be a better person.” Marc shared these sentiments reporting, “I’d like to expand my education even further.” Thus, students considered higher education an important component of their futures and identified several reasons for their educational aspirations.

However, when it came to actively pursuing and preparing for these educational goals, students differed. While it was clear many people in their lives had expressed the importance of college and students had internalized this message, they did not all approach the college preparation process in the same way nor did they receive the same types of support. Analysis of the interviews resulted in the formation of three distinct groups of students based on their preparation for college. The first group (“College-Informed”) consisted of six students who reported achieving academically and had begun the process of investigating colleges. For this group, college preparation in 9<sup>th</sup> grade consisted of learning about post-secondary education options and the college application process. It was clear that these students were on their way to higher education, armed with personal initiative and supportive family members, school staff, and peers. The second group (“Academically-Focused”) of six students also indicated during their interviews that they were achieving academically and identified support from multiple individuals for their academic pursuits. These students conceptualized college preparation in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade as succeeding academically and they had not yet begun the process of learning specifics about the college process. Similar to the second group of students, the eight students in the third group (“Struggling”) were not actively involved in obtaining information about college. They were also struggling with their academic motivation and

had less support than the second group while trying to accomplish academic goals.

Together, these three groups paint a very different picture regarding the ways in which youth are prepared for college and what it takes to attain that preparation.

### **Group 1: College-Informed**

Anita, Karen, Carlos, Juan, Lara, and Anna reported doing well in school and taking academic achievement seriously. These students were enrolled in college preparatory and honors courses and indicated during their interviews that they were succeeding in this coursework. They also reported engaging in discussions and activities that provided specific information regarding the college application process and what college life is like. These students attended college fairs, visited college campuses, and participated in discussions with family members and school staff regarding the college application process. In order to learn more about college, Anita signed up for the mailing lists at the colleges she visited with her school and her father. “Well last year I went to, I don't know, like maybe like five colleges um and some universities. And, um, they um they ask for your for your um address and then they send you brochures and all the information that you want.” Karen also visited several colleges in the area through her participation with a club designed to provide students with information and resources during the college process. Describing these experiences, she said, “...last year I was in um something called the College Club, we, cuz I was interested into what college is, what going on to, so we learned like things about college tuition and stuff like that. I visited like two colleges like I visited [Name of College] and stuff like that.” The youth in this group were in the process of accumulating the knowledge they would need in order to make informed decisions about their educational futures. They knew it was important to

start preparing early on in high school and engaged in many of the same college awareness activities as their suburban peers.

As a result of their participation in college oriented conversations and activities, these students were beginning to understand the requirements for college, aspects of the college application, and their options for the future. Students knew that there were course requirements for college and that they would need a certain number of course credits in order to be eligible for college enrollment. They were also aware of the importance of extracurricular activities and the need to demonstrate involvement in the school and community beyond their academic pursuits. College-Informed students had frequent discussions with family members, teachers, and peers regarding the college application including the forms they would need to complete, the essays they would have to write, and the need to apply for scholarships or financial aid. In many cases, these students had obtained copies of college applications and reviewed these documents with a family member or friend. Finally, these students were learning about college life both inside and beyond the classroom. They knew about lecture halls and styles of teaching as well as the need to declare a major. They were also excited about the social aspects of college such as meeting new people, living in dormitories, and eating at dining halls.

College-Informed youth accumulated this knowledge through a combination of students' own initiative and the support of multiple people in their lives. Each of these students sought out answers to questions, asked their parents and teachers for information about college, and voluntarily signed up for events. When students elicited assistance from others, their requests were met with enthusiasm and help. These students also benefited from relationships with individuals who occasionally offered assistance without

being asked. Close relationships with family members, school staff, and peers provided the opportunity for these individuals to engage youth in conversations about college and provide suggestions. Thus, the acquisition of specific information about college required students to become actively involved in this process and to take advantage of the support that was offered from others.

**Agency and college support within families.** College-Informed students' interactions with their family members around college illustrate the back and forth of agency and support characteristic of this group. Carlos' experiences attending an after-school program twice a week designed to provide college support to students is one example. "No first I asked my mom like if which college she would like I go and then she say it depends on you on your profession and I told her I want to be a doctor and she said that I ask [Program Name] and they gave me types of colleges." As indicated by the quote above, his involvement with this program was the result of the support he received from his mother and her suggestions that he become involved as well as his own initiative and willingness to spend free time preparing for college. When he accessed information from individuals outside the home, his mother took the time to review college materials with him and discuss his options. "I went to ask [Program Name], I ask what's the lady at school and if she can give me the types of colleges that have medicine. And they show me some. And then I tell my mom and we were both looking on the internet." Juan also describes the instances during which the acquisition of information about college is fostered by personal initiative and family support. In order to learn more about financial aid opportunities, Juan scheduled appointments to speak with admissions representatives at various colleges. He visited the schools that were close to home and had telephone

conversations with the representatives from colleges that were out of state. His mother helped him prepare for these interviews, providing feedback as he practiced what he was going to say. Juan's uncle also participated in this venture, driving him to the colleges that were close by.

These students were often engaged in discussions about college with parents and family members in order to learn more about their educational futures. Anna drew on her extended family network in order to learn more about the college process. Knowing that several family friends had attended college, she called one of them to ask about college applications. "Um we spoke, it was, well, this was during the time I was applying to high schools and she told me that it was pretty much just like my high school applications. I had to write a couple of essays and do a couple of book reports and just do a lot of stuff to be able to get into high school." Karen also drew on her family network to learn more about college. Although she never graduated, Karen's mother attended one year of college and was a frequent source of information. "I asked her how it was and if, if she was ever intimidated by the work and stuff like that. Like I just want to know how the work is. And like how the dorm is and stuff like that. It's pretty cool."

For many of these youth, the topic of college was ever-present and something that could be engaged at any time during conversations at home. Parents and family members were supportive of their college aspirations and talk about college was a typical aspect of family life. Juan's comments illustrate this concept. In response to the question of how conversations about college begin in his household, he said, "Um I don't know, it just gets thrown out there. Out of nowhere... Yeah just like something floating in the sky and then it comes out of nowhere." Lara described similar experiences with her brother and

sister-in-law who are her legal guardians. Responding to the same question she said, “Yeah. It just kinda comes into our conversation.” Anna’s mother frequently inserted the topic of college into seemingly unrelated conversations. During a discussion of flower arrangements for an upcoming wedding, Anna’s mother suggested that she have flowers in her dorm room when she got to college. Similarly, Anita brought up her college aspirations during a family car trip when they passed by a billboard advertising a local university. This context encouraged youth to draw on family members as resources during the college process and sent the message that students should be actively thinking about their future college attendance.

**Agency and college support at school.** Students in the first group also relied on school personnel for information about college. They asserted that school staff were likely to have the information they needed and would probably help students with their college plans. According to these students, it was part of counselors’ and teachers’ job descriptions to help youth prepare for college. Each of these individuals had attended college themselves and would be able to share their personal experiences. For instance, in describing the conversations she has with teachers about college, Lara said, “They, they inform me about it, about college and how they, their experiences and stuff.” Anna reported that she would rely on her guidance counselor for information about college entrance requirements because she has more experience advising students with Anna’s occupational aspirations than family members. “Because my mom didn't actually finish college and um she didn't take like any special courses to be able to get into like special colleges but uh I think a school counselor would have more experience with that than my mother who half finished college.”

Many of these students had close relationships with teachers and counselors that fostered the exchange of information and resources for college. The pattern of these interactions mirrored those that took place in the family context with both students and school staff initiating conversations. Karen's guidance counselor took an active interest in her college preparation, inviting her to meet with him and discuss her current progress in school and college options. Lara reported a close relationship with a teacher who encouraged her to pursue higher education. It was clear that this relationship motivated her to go to college and provided a context in which she could ask for help as she prepared for that goal. "That, that it's [college] um that it's very important you know that it's important to go and it's a good opportunity and stuff like that. He's [teacher] very proud of me, of my grades." Although he was supported by multiple teachers, Juan had a special relationship with his science teacher who pushed him to achieve academically and spoke with him about colleges. At the time of the interview, this teacher was investigating ways to get Juan into the magnet program at the high school and talking to him about financial aid for college. "Um she says we just recently talked about um I may move into the magnet program. That's how I should've started off high school, in the magnet program. Uh so we were talking about how as I achieve in the Honors program, and switch over to the magnet program, and then achieve higher, and then I could, I could go on to college for free. And then we started talking about Yale or Harvard so."

Students took advantage of this support and engaged school staff in conversations about college. Anita reported that she and her friends often approach teachers and ask for their help in finding out information about college. "They [teachers] find out how you could get in and stuff. Because I've seen many of my friends they tell their teachers and

their teachers find out and on one occasion I told my computer key teacher and um she was like yeah I'll find out for you and then she had the information the next day.” Anna recounted a time during middle school when she asked her teacher about college and was subsequently given extra credit assignments and additional work in order to raise her grades. As described earlier, Carlos approached his guidance counselor to ask for more information about colleges with medical programs and reviewed this information later at home with his mother.

While these students benefited from close relationships with teachers and had several interactions with school staff regarding specific college topics, it is important to note that these interactions were not described as part of the fabric of the school. Several of the students in this group indicated that overall, the school was not actively involved in providing college awareness information and activities for freshmen or sophomores. Carlos reported that most of the college assistance was provided to juniors and seniors and when asked what the school was currently doing for freshman he reported, “I think nothing really.” Lara also expressed some frustration with her access to information and resources for college at school. She suggested that the school “help um like help with like more information and stuff” and went on to describe her visits to the counseling office to get information only to find that the counselors were not there or were unavailable. Thus, the students in this group would not have possessed the college knowledge they did if it weren't for the personal relationships they had with teachers and their own initiative to learn more about college. Anita explicitly highlighted the demand for student agency at school with her comments, “Let's see, for mainly you have to you have to go to them [teachers] and stuff but they don't really ask like what do you guys need and stuff like

that. They only say oh, like you have to ask them the questions and then they start the conversation and then it goes on from there.”

**College support from peers.** Students in this group reported lots of support for college from their peer groups and would frequently engage in discussions about college with their friends. These conversations went beyond cursory remarks regarding the importance of college and included planning for and finding out about college. Preparation for higher education permeated these students’ peer networks and was a constant source of encouragement. Students created elaborate plans to attend the same colleges as their friends and participated in college preparatory activities together. Carlos, Anna, Juan, and Karen each made plans with their friends to go to college together and the promise of this shared experience motivated them to do well in school and prepare for higher education. Juan described his plans with a close friend, “Um my friend [friend’s name], in my Spanish class right now, um he said he wants to go to Yale and we said that we’re gonna go together.” Anna made similar plans with her best friend. “Um I planned out pretty much my entire college career with my best friend. Um we have like an entire plan. We, we’re gonna be, but we’re both gonna be forensic scientists, hopefully.” She went on to describe plans to share a dorm room and secure on-campus jobs together to help pay for school.

In addition to attending the same school, Karen and her friends have aspirations to go into business together when they graduate. This plan is discussed frequently and Karen’s friends encourage each other to do well in school in order to realize this collective goal. “Yeah cuz most like, like there’s like five of us who all want to be pediatricians and so we’re always saying we’re going to open up a business. And we’re

always saying we want to go to the same college, we want to learn the things together, we want to go through it together. It's almost like kind of like a little pact that we have.” As Karen describes, this plan operates as a “pact” among her friends and sends the message that she is accountable for doing her part to make these aspirations a reality not only for herself but also for her friends.

Support and encouragement for college from friends also includes pro-academic behaviors and learning about college together. Lara reports that her friends support her college aspirations, encourage her to achieve academically, and ensure that she is participating in school. She says, “They encourage me to go, they encourage me to do better. Like I have a lot of friends that like want me in class all the time and you know.” Her friends monitor her behavior in school and have made class attendance an expectation and norm among their group of friends. Anita received similar encouragement for college from her friends. She described her friends as a “support group” for college and discussed their experiences searching for college information together. “Well let's see um we were in the library we were just talking about what colleges we wanted to go to so we got on the internet, we found out what would mostly suit us to go to college and then they they um then we talked about it and looked up more information.” Not only are these students talking about what it might be like to go to college, they are actively engaged in behaviors that support one another’s aspirations.

### **Group 2: Academically-Focused**

The students in this group also reported doing very well academically and concentrated their efforts on succeeding in their college preparatory and honors classes. The Academically-Focused students conceptualized college preparation at this early stage

of high school as doing well in school and were not yet concerned with learning about higher education. Daniel, Hector, Maria, Esmeralda, Peter, and Guillermo were actively committed to academic achievement and succeeding in high school. They viewed their current achievement as the path to college and were dedicated to their educational aspirations and their identified means of reaching them. Esmeralda expressed these beliefs saying, “Um like if I really do good in school I know I could go to college.” These students suggested that good grades were the one thing that would ensure college attendance as well as the primary reason they might not realize their educational goals. Similar to the other students in this group, in response to the question of what things might help him go to college Hector stated, “Um like get good grades. Like study for tests.” Daniel also reported that his ability to attend college was dependent upon his current school performance. When asked what things might keep him from getting to college, he said, “If I don't like try my best and like if I don't keep doing what I have to do in life so I could end up going.”

The emphasis that these students placed on academic achievement was complemented by their attention to college level work. They knew that college was going to be difficult and believed that working hard in high school would prepare them well for higher education. They received many messages from family members and school staff that college was going to be hard and they internalized these messages. Daniel's brother who was currently enrolled in college often warned about the rigor of college work. In describing these conversations, Daniel said, “Like you got to like try hard and like make sure you like get to all your classes and try your best in each one of them cuz like he said like in college like they don't play around with you no more.” Students received similar

messages at school. When asked what they had learned about college while in high school, Maria, Guillermo, and Peter all reported that school staff emphasized the difficulty of college work and that college was going to be “rough.”

Such messages motivated students to invest effort in school and prepare themselves for the difficult work that lay ahead. These students voluntarily participated in discussions and activities that would improve their grades and help them succeed. Such involvement was made possible by a host of individuals who provided academic resources and assistance. Thus, these students were also engaged in a two-way interaction with supportive adults. However, in contrast to the first group, their conversations and behaviors were focused around academic achievement as opposed to acquiring college information. For example, Guillermo reported that he stayed after school each day to receive help from his English teacher. This provided the opportunity to get assistance with work he may have misunderstood and discuss ways for him to become more involved in class. Esmeralda also sought out assistance when she was having difficulty understanding course content. She met with a tutor any time her grades were suffering or if she needed extra help.

**Academic support within families.** The parents and family members of the youth in this group vigilantly monitored their academic performance and provided academic assistance when they needed help. Many youth described parents’ efforts to ensure that they were doing well in school and supported in their school work. While this constant monitoring was sometimes frustrating to students, they ultimately appreciated this support. Peter described his reactions to his father’s frequent nagging in this way, “It makes me like a little mad sometimes cuz I’ve heard it over and over again. But it makes

me feel good cuz I know that he cares about me and like with school and he's pushing me and it's helped me in life.” As a result of this support, many of these youth suggested that family members were central to their college preparation and that they relied on these individuals for help during the college process.

Academic support from parents and family members assumed many forms for these youth. Several students described parents’ strict monitoring of their performance and the way in which these discussions were connected to conversations about college. Guillermo reported that his mother had established a daily routine of checking on his progress and current school assignments. He said, “Cuz like every day I come home and she like has to check my homework in my bag. She says you have to do the homework. And every time like every time like I miss one homework, she arguing with me about college. She she be telling me that a lot.” Peter also reported frequent monitoring from his mother regarding his homework and school projects and believed that these reminders helped him do well in school. “My mom. She always asks me if I'm doin my homework, if I have any projects or somethin.” Maria’s parents used a system of rewards and punishments to help her stay focused and succeed in school. When she did well in school, Maria reported receiving “prizes” such as money or gifts. Alternatively, when her grades did not meet her parents’ expectations, she was not allowed out with her friends until her grades improved.

Parents also provided help with homework and school assignments in order to support their children. Daniel described the assistance he received from his parents the previous year when he was struggling at school. “Like help, sit there around the kitchen table, help me do my homework, help me study. Like help me with projects and like

everything like that.” Hector’s father also helped him with his school assignments. He described the way his father would read over his English homework and check it for mistakes. “Yeah he tells, cuz he, I’m a good writer so he tells me just do what you need to do. Um then he reads it after and he tells me what’s like, the punctuation, yeah.” As described above, when Esmeralda was having difficulty understanding course material, her mother signed her up for tutoring. This action committed both energy and financial resources to Esmeralda’s academic success.

**Academic support at school.** When asked how teachers and school staff supported their college aspirations, these youth framed their responses with regard to academic achievement. They believed teachers wanted them to go to college because they pushed them to do well and cared about their academic achievement. For instance, Esmeralda described the way in which teachers emphasized the importance of doing well in school and working hard. She said, “They [teachers] like they mostly like talk about your work and you know if you want to go to college you have to do your schoolwork and you can’t play around.” Maria highlighted the effort of teachers and school staff to keep the school “running hard.” When asked to provide an example of this investment, she outlined her thought process. “Like they do sweeps so everybody’s at school. So that means that they want us in class, they want us to do good and then graduate and go to college.” Similar to students’ comments regarding family monitoring, Maria believed that strict teacher supervision was an indicator of genuine concern for students’ well-being.

Teachers demonstrated their concern for student performance in various ways. According to the students in this group, teachers monitored their work and provided motivation and assistance when things were difficult. Peter said, “They [teachers] try to

like make me do my work and then help me with it. Like try to give me extra credit so I could get better grades.” It was evident that teachers wanted students to succeed and their flexibility indicated that student success was more important than pre-established rules. Peter’s mention of extra credit assignments is one example of this flexibility. Guillermo also voiced similar indications of teachers’ concern for their students’ achievement. “And they [teachers] just like they just like be forcing us to do our work. They give us second chances and stuff.” These actions demonstrated to Hector that teachers cared about students and wanted them to achieve academically. Ultimately, he reported, it was the responsibility of the student to do well given the supports teachers provided. Acknowledging his own liability, he said, “Like if um like me I’m if I’m a procrastinator but I always do the work but if they [students] don’t then they’ll, they’ll make it difficult themselves. Like the teachers don’t give you grades, the students get their grades by themselves.”

While all of these students reported confidence in the encouragement and support they received from the teachers and staff at their school, they were less likely than the College-Informed students to report personal interactions and close relationships with these individuals. Seven College-Informed students described such relationships with teachers and school staff while only three Academically Focused students indicated that they benefited from personal student-teacher interactions. For the most part, the support that Academically Focused students received was directed toward all students in the school and was not unique to this group of students. Peter was the only student in this group to report receiving personal assistance from teachers at the school. Hector and Guillermo identified past teachers with whom they had developed strong relationships

but did not mention any current school staff. During homeroom, Peter occasionally received personal attention from his teacher during a goal-setting exercise. As part of homeroom, this teacher had established a routine of checking in with his students and talking to them about short-term and long-term goals. When asked for an example of the types of goals he discussed with this teacher Peter responded, “Um an example of a short term goal would be like doing good in class, get like a 100 for that day. And a long term goal would be like passing that year of high school.”

Hector maintained a close relationship with his fifth grade teacher whom he still visited occasionally. This relationship provided a context for homework assistance and discussions about school. “Um she, she um she sometimes like if I go over there she, she's like take out your homework and maybe I could help you or something.” Guillermo also reported a strong relationship with previous school staff. He spoke with his eighth grade guidance counselor about school and his aspirations for college. She supported his educational goals and provided him with suggestions for how to do well in school. “Yeah she told me to stay after school every day like just for an hour. Just so I can get whatever I missed and do all my work there before I hang out with my friends.” This advice influenced the way he approached his work in high school and motivated him to stay after school to receive help from his English teacher. The rest of the students in this group did not report any significant relationships from teachers and focused instead on the general support teachers provided to all students.

**Academic support from peers.** Students in this group were surrounded by peers who emphasized the importance of doing well in school and supported each other in their academic work. These students did not discuss college aspirations often, but

conversations about high school academic life were frequent. Peer groups operated like small learning communities, providing help with homework, encouragement, and monitoring. Guillermo reported that he and his friends help each other out with work. “We like like some of my friends have the same lunch period. We go to the library, we will get a table and um do um review what we had for homework before we go to class. And and if someone doesn't do it we just help 'em out a little bit.” Peter knows his friends want him to go to college because of way they keep track of his current performance. He said, “Cuz they're [friends] always like asking me how I'm doin in school. Am I doin good? Like always wonderin' how like I am in school, how my grades are and stuff like that.” These students benefited from the support they received from peers and they gave back in kind. Hector described the way he monitored his friends' academic behaviors. When he saw that his friends were not putting forth the effort they needed to put forth in order to learn course content, he addressed their lack of investment. “I tell them like do your, why you doin this? Like why are you getting every answer wrong?”

These students' closest friends had high educational aspirations and engaged in the behaviors above in order to help each other achieve those goals. However, unlike College-Informed students, these youth also reported interacting with friends who were not as academically oriented. Daniel reported that half of his friends were supportive of his college aspirations and the other half neither encouraged nor discouraged those plans. He described picking up on subtle hints that not all of his friends were thinking about college. “We like we just like at lunchtime sometimes we like talk about it [college] or just like some people like change the subject quick really fast so like they want to talk about something else instead of college.” While she didn't consider them her close

friends, Esmeralda noted that some of the peers she spent time with didn't "believe in going to college." When asked what she meant and how these friends felt about college she said, "They basically say that like college is like too long cuz you have to go to four years of college and you know college is hard and it's yeah it's basically hard for them." Maria indicated that one of her friends struggled in school and was not interested in college. This friend didn't discourage her from attending college but did not have college aspirations himself.

The mixed messages they received from peers about college did not deter these students from developing their own educational goals. They benefited from the support they received from their academically-oriented peers and reported that their friends who expressed some negativity about college did not impact their decisions. When asked whether she, too, was concerned about the difficulty or length of college, Esmeralda reported, "I think like if you really wanna go you could do anything you put your mind to." Instead of being influenced by her friend's lack of interest in college, Maria attempted to be a positive influence for him. When asked whether she thought he affected her decision to go to college she replied, "No I just help him sometimes with his work like we're good friends but I mostly try to help him." This approach differed from the one taken by Daniel who asserted that his friends' plans for after high school were personal decisions. "It's like their decision. They want to like do whatever they want, they should." He did not allow these friends to impact his educational goals and he did not attempt to steer them toward a particular path after high school.

### **Group 3: Struggling**

Eight of the students interviewed struggled with their academic motivation and were not sure of their plans after high school. While they all identified the importance of higher education, Marc, Suzana, Jenny, Raymond, Gloria, Felipe, Gladys, and Jose were not certain that they would be able to realize their educational aspirations. Many of the students suggested that their high school performance might keep them from attending college and several Struggling students were enrolled in non-college preparatory courses such as Home Economics. For instance, Felipe indicated that he needed to improve his grades and work harder in school in order to make it to college. When asked if he thought he would be able to go to college he responded, “Um well if I'm doing what I'm doing, no. But if I actually do better myself like, yes.” Raymond made similar remarks regarding his lack of motivation. “Mmm probably not like a really fancy college. Probably like a community college cuz I don't know like I try but I don't I don't like try my hardest.” Marc, Jenny, and Gloria also reported concerns about their current academic performance and its ability to prevent them from reaching their educational goals.

In addition to doubts about their academic performance, Suzana and Jenny highlighted financial obstacles to college attendance. Suzana knew that she had to raise the money for college on her own and that her parents were not able to help her with tuition costs. This impacted her beliefs about whether she would actually be able to go to college. “Well that depends if like cuz after high school I have to get a job and I have to try to cuz my parents can't afford college so I have to try to make it all myself so if I do then I'll be able to go.” Jenny also reported that her family was struggling financially and those difficulties would influence her ability to attend college. Despite aspirations to

attend an elite private university, Jenny doubted that she would be able to get into the school because she could not afford the tuition.

These students' concerns about academic performance and the cost of college highlight the absence of both student initiative and support from family members, teachers, and peers, characteristics of the other two groups. Many of these youth did not seek out support and information for college because they believed it was too early to start planning for life after high school. Indeed, many of the students in this group reported that they would attempt to learn more about college as they progressed through high school. Marc, Suzana, Gloria, Raymond, and Felipe all stated that information about college was something that they'd pursue their junior or senior year of high school. When asked if he had spoken with his guidance counselor about college, Marc indicated that he did not plan to have those conversations until 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade. At the time of the interview, Jose had not spoken with anyone at school about specific information for college either and did not know when those conversations might take place. This misconception concerning when college preparation began was most aptly described by Raymond. In response to the question of when he might start to learn more about college he said, "Mmm I don't really like I don't know. Probably next year or the year after that is when I'll start. Like probably next year is when I'll start like worrying about it, you know."

Unfortunately, strugglers' misconceptions were not addressed through family, teacher, or peer intervention. These individuals did not indicate to students that they should be taking an active role in learning about college, nor did they volunteer specific information about the college process. This lack of support and students' struggles with

agency extended to the academic context. Despite the fact that many were concerned about their performance in high school, most had not sought out academic support. Gloria suggested that the school might have opportunities for academic assistance. “Probably there's like programs that would help you put your grades up and work harder.” However, when asked if she had attempted to find out more about these programs or become involved she said no. Similarly, none of her family members or teachers had offered more information or enrolled her in such programs despite being aware of her academic performance.

**Mixed support within families.** The messages students in this group received from their families was more heterogeneous than the support provided in the previous two groups. Most of the parents and family members of the students in this group expressed the value of a college education and encouraged students to develop high educational aspirations. However, there were a few parents and siblings who discouraged these students. Suzana’s brothers made negative comments about school and discouraged her from pursuing higher education. Combined with the financial stress her family experienced, these comments made Suzana question her educational future. “Well cuz like cuz like I said we when we get out of college, when we get out of high school cuz we have to work for our money to go to college they be like you're just gonna waste your time you know it's gonna be like you're just gonna get tired. Aren't you sick already of school? You've been there for like 12 years.” Gladys also received negative messages about college from her family members. While her mother didn’t explicitly discourage her from pursuing higher education, she emphasized how difficult it would be for Gladys. She reported her mother saying, “High school like college, college is going to be tough

for you. It's gonna real be tough.” These messages, along with a family history of military service, inspired Gladys to consider joining the army after completing high school.

Unlike College-Informed students and Academically Focused students, when the parents and family members of Struggling students encouraged them to develop high educational aspirations, their support highlighted the importance of college but did not include a discussion of how to realize those goals. Conversations about college emphasized the value of higher education and its ability to ensure future financial security. Raymond’s mother and grandmother often engaged him in these types of conversations. “You need to, they say it's not going to benefit them, it's for my own good and so you don't struggle and go through what they what they go through you know. Typical parent stuff.” Jenny reported similar messages from her parents. “They say they don't want me to struggle so I'll to go to college. They don't want me to be like how do you say it, um, they don't want me to struggle basically. And they don't want me to end up like they are. They're struggling with money and stuff.” Many conversations about college grew out of discussions about students’ current school performance. When addressing students’ low academic achievement, parents and family members asserted that such performance would not lead to college attendance. This was often the case in Felipe’s household. “Um my usually they start it up cuz they start it up by talking about my um grades or what am I doing wrong. Or my um my work ethic or something like that.” Gloria’s mother also raised the topic of college during conversations about current school performance. “She does. It's like it's like we talk about my grades and then she like leads on to talk about my future.”

Despite the emphasis on the importance of college, the parents and family members of these students did not follow up such messages with conversations and activities that helped students learn about higher education or achieve academically. Students did not report engaging in discussions at home about specific college topics. Also absent was the creation of a home environment that provided academic assistance such as help with homework, tutoring, or daily monitoring of school assignments. Thus, students internalized the importance of college, but didn't have the support at home that would enable them to realize those goals. Even when the opportunity arose to engage in some of these types of activities, parents did not take advantage of the situation. Jose's mother was currently enrolled in college at the time of the interview and he reported having several conversations with her about her work. However, these discussions were very general in nature and did not facilitate the exchange of specific information about college. When talking about his mother's college application essay, Jose reported that his mother told him, "Yeah she said you got to write it really good and make them let you know, what would you know to go in college." These comments emphasized the importance of quality without identifying the components that constitute quality. Similar messages were sent during discussions of his mother's college work. "And she was telling me how, how you're supposed to be in college. She said it's hard but you gotta try your best." Without the procedural knowledge of what the college process entails or how to achieve academically, these students struggled with meeting their educational goals.

**General messages at school.** Marc, Suzana, Jenny, Raymond, Gloria, Felipe, Gladys, and Jose each reported that teachers and school staff encouraged them to go to college. Messages about the importance of higher education were often delivered during

classroom activities. Marc described these messages saying, “Basically they’re [teachers] saying um to go to college cuz it um it helps you better in life. To be more successful.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Jose’s teachers. He said he knew his teachers wanted the students at school to pursue higher education because, “They say that they want us to go to college”. Despite the encouragement that students reported, they also indicated that specific conversations about college were rare. Several students in this group reported that college was not a frequent topic in conversations at school. According to Suzana, “Well freshman year like they just like tell you to be careful like not to trample yourself but yeah that's all. They don't talk about college that much.” Jenny and Jose also reported that they did not talk to school staff about college very often. It was something that just “hasn’t come up yet.” Felipe asserted that all teachers wanted students to be “college ready.” When asked to define what this term meant he said, “I think it means like they want all of us to be like expand our minds and get our education.” Taken together, these comments indicate that students felt as though teachers and school staff support the development of their educational aspirations. However, as can be seen by Felipe’s explanation of the “college ready” phrase, teachers have not been explicit concerning the ways in which students can achieve those goals. To Felipe and the other students in this group, being ready for college means that a student recognizes the importance of higher education. It does not, however, entail the steps students need to take in order to successfully complete the college application and enrollment process.

Indeed, students had several misconceptions about academics and the college process that no one at school had rectified. During the course of the interview, Jenny mentioned that she would like to obtain a scholarship for college in order to reduce the

financial burden on her family. She had heard at school that she needed to have a GPA in order to apply for this assistance, but no one had told her what that meant. She said, “I, I think they have it here [the high school] like scholarships. Yeah I would like to have one like a full scholarship... Well I don't know like what, they say you have to have like a GPA. I don't know what that is.” In addition to a lack of information about the college process, these students also failed to get specific information about how to achieve academically. Marc reported that he met with his guidance counselor earlier in the year because he was failing a few of his classes. The purpose of this visit was simply to inform Marc that he was doing poorly and needed to raise his grades. When asked if the counselor gave Marc any suggestions for how to improve Marc said, “They just let you know.”

Perhaps the lack of specific information about how to complete high school assignments or approach the college application process was due to the fact that unlike the previous two groups, the students in this group did not have personal relationships with teachers or school staff. The encouragement that they received for college as well as the small pieces of information they picked up at school were the result of teachers’ comments to the whole classroom. For instance, Raymond reported receiving some information in his freshman seminar class. “He [the teacher] talks about like he gives like packets and he like we like figure out the working stuff. How much it's going to cost, like the like living living life after high school. And college and stuff.” These conversations were directed to everyone in the class and were mostly focused on life skills. The absence of close relationships with teachers among this group of students is explicitly addressed by Gloria. When asked if she ever spoke to adults at school about college she said, “It's

just like those little conversations and those little things teachers say all the time you know like oh you guys need to be ready for college and all that. All teachers say that. I don't really have like one-on-one conversations where I actually ask them about it.”

Neither Gloria nor her teachers or counselor had taken the initiative to develop a personal relationship that could foster the exchange of information about college or provide a context for academic assistance. Without these close relationships, students did not receive the same type of school support provided to students in the other two groups.

**Mixed messages about college from peers.** The peer groups of these students were less certain of their plans after college. Most youth reported that about half of their friends were considering college while the other half were thinking about entering the workforce or joining the military. The variety of post-secondary plans entertained by their peers lead to infrequent discussions about college. Occasionally these students would talk about going to college together or would work on school assignments together, but such interactions were rare. Gloria described the conversations she had with her friends saying, “We don't really talk about college. Like we don't really say like oh we gotta do good in school or you can't go to college. We don't really talk like that.” When the topic of college did arise among friends, discussions mirrored those within the family and school contexts. College was identified as important for future success, but students did not talk with their friends about specific information regarding college preparation. For instance, Suzana described the conversations she has with her friends saying, “Well everytime people talk about college it's mostly about money and like you know you need a good job, you want to be somebody in life. That's mostly it.” Jenny and her friends also identified the benefits of a college degree, but their discussions focused

on potential barriers to university attendance. “They [friends] say they want to go to different colleges, that's where they wanna go. They don't want to stay and work at like Burger King or McDonalds. They wanna go but we all have like the same problem. The money. And we all need to get like better grades.”

Instead of focusing on future plans, students’ interactions with friends revolved around their social lives. Raymond and his friends talked about “other stuff” and Gladys’ friends discussed romantic relationships. When asked what she and her friends typically talked about, Gladys responded, “They just give me tips. Boys. That's the only thing they be doing.” In some cases, peers distracted these students from their academic pursuits. Despite a successful school record in middle school, Felipe reported that he was not doing well in high school and got in trouble for skipping classes. When asked why he had begun to engage in this behavior, he suggested a combination of school structure and peers. He said, “Everything was so easy. Like classes are so far you always could get stopped by somebody and they could always say hey you wanna go here? Leave school. Everything is so easy.” In sum, these friendships were focused on the social aspects of adolescence, conversations rarely involved the topic of college, and in some instances peers were a negative influence on student behavior.

### **Discussion**

The findings from the qualitative study make important contributions to our understanding of how Latino youth are supported through the development and pursuit of their educational goals. Such findings both corroborate and extend the results of the quantitative study, providing a detailed illustration of the ways in which 20 Latino youth access support for higher education as well as the nature of that support. These students’

experiences highlight the importance of considering the role of the adolescent in taking advantage of their access to information and resources in addition to the provision of that assistance by important individuals in their lives. Students' words also reveal which types of support are the most effective in fostering educational aspirations and college preparation among youth. The findings suggest that those students who are most engaged in the college preparation process are those who receive specific information about college from their parents, teachers, and peers. They also have high levels of agency and participate in the attainment of this support, seeking out information from significant others. Thus, college preparation among the students in this sample was the result of a combination of supportive contexts and student agency.

Another group of students represented a different contingent of adolescents, those who are academically prepared for college but are not yet well informed regarding their post-secondary options. The students in this group were engaged in their school work and had support for these pursuits from multiple contexts. They reported discussions and activities focused on academic achievement and the ways that such success can lead to higher education. These interactions took place within close personal relationships with family members, teachers, and peers. The origin of the differences in college preparation among the College-Informed and Academically-Focused students is unclear from the present study. Both groups of students benefited from supportive contexts and evidenced high levels of agency in their educational lives. The variation in the types of messages they received and the kind of information they elicited may be due to numerous factors and future research should examine the reasons why students conceptualize college preparation in these different ways. In addition, the importance of such distinctions in

college preparation needs to be understood further. Do these differences eventually lead to variation in college attendance or are both College-Informed and Academically-Focused students equally likely to enroll in higher education? Future work should examine how these two groups of students continue to plan for college throughout high school and the implications of such preparation on college access and success.

A third group of students resided at the low end of the college preparation spectrum. They struggled academically and did not have much knowledge about the college preparation process. They lacked the motivation and initiative to succeed in either of these tasks and were not provided with the support from others that would guarantee such preparation. They received mixed messages about higher education and did not have access to the procedural knowledge of how to turn their educational aspirations into reality. In contrast to the students at the high end of college preparation, the students at this end of the continuum did not exhibit agency and they did not benefit from the supportive safety nets provided by family members, teachers, and peers that surrounded other youth. Thus, it appears that support and initiative occur simultaneously, for better or worse.

Such findings are supported by an ecological framework as well as research on individual agency. Ecological theory asserts that interactions between individuals and their environments drive development. These interactions create a web of interconnections that foster both changes in the individual as well as changes in the environment. Lerner and Barton (2000) connect this observation about the relationship between context and individual to their study of adolescent agency. "In other words, the development of action and of individual efficacy, control, and control beliefs involve

circular functions between the adolescent and his or her context, and constitute the key, relational process linking the developing person to the other levels of his or her context” (p. 460). The interaction between the individual and his or her context is critical for the development of agency. Such a relationship is seen clearly in the present findings. Adolescents nested within uniformly supportive relationships exhibited high levels of agency while those who encountered mixed levels of support did not engage in initiative.

**Implications.** While no assertions can be made regarding the direction of particular relationships, a deeper understanding of how different aspects of students’ lives cluster together provides insights concerning ways to structure support and assistance during the college preparation process. The present findings suggest that the content of messages students receive about college as well as the ways in which these messages are delivered may impact their college trajectories. All of the students interviewed identified the importance of post-secondary education and received encouragement for college attendance. What differentiated highly prepared students from students with uncertain educational futures was the attainment of specific information about various college options and the application process. Highly prepared students were engaged in discussions regarding different types of institutions, options for financial assistance, and components of the college application. This detailed information put them at an advantage over their peers who simply received encouragement without further instructions regarding the college process. Thus, the messages about college that students receive from significant others must go beyond the value of higher education and include the procedural knowledge necessary to achieve educational goals.

This is also true of the academic support provided to youth. In order to better prepare adolescents who are struggling with motivation and at the bottom end of the college preparation continuum, family members and school staff should supply concrete strategies for how to succeed. The students in the present sample who did not receive this type of assistance were the ones who had difficulty completing their work and staying on task. While numerous individuals monitored their performance and encouraged them to achieve, they did not offer suggestions for how to improve. These students need explicit instruction concerning study strategies, self-monitoring, and the academic behaviors that will lead to success. It is important to note that this type of assistance can be provided regardless of the personal academic preparation of the parent. The educational backgrounds of the students in the sample varied across college preparation level. Parents of students in the high preparation group who had low levels of educational attainment found other ways to provide this support to their children. They drew on extended family members and community organizations when they could not provide help with particular academic content. They set up tutoring for their children and encouraged them to stay after school to get the assistance they needed. These parents created a home environment that supported such success even if they were unfamiliar with the content of students' assignments. Thus, individuals and programs interested in increasing college knowledge among Latino youth should ensure that discussions provide adolescents with specific instructions for how to achieve their educational goals.

In addition to the importance of the content of messages concerning college preparation and academic success, the delivery of such messages may also impact students' achievement and agency. Students in the present sample who had close personal

relationships with family members and school staff were the ones who exhibited high levels of college knowledge. Such relationships provided the context for important adults to offer individualized academic support and specific information about college. They also served as venues where adolescents could exert their agency and ask questions about higher education. Past research highlights the importance of supportive relationships in students' access to information and resources for college. Such work suggests that the social-psychological characteristics of relationships impact adolescents' agency and help-seeking behaviors (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). As indicated by the present findings, students embedded in close personal relationships with parents, teachers, and peers are more likely to draw on those individuals for support and guidance. It is important that schools and programs encourage the development of personal relationships between staff and students through policies and practices that demonstrate the expectation for such connections. Instituting advisory groups, improving college counseling services, and providing professional development to staff regarding the importance of reaching out to all students may be ways to achieve this goal.

Providing opportunities for youth to develop agency and personal empowerment may also impact access to college preparation by capitalizing on youth's participation in that process. While the presence of close, supportive relationships may be one explanation for differences in students' levels of agency, another possibility is variation in students' development of the skills and strategies that enable such actions.

Encouraging involvement in activities that promote such development may indirectly influence college preparation. Extracurricular activities are one example of contexts that support youth agency and strategic thinking across ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

These programs connect youth with adults who facilitate student decision-making by providing a mixture of freedom and assistance, something Larson and Angus refer to as “leading from behind” (Larson & Angus, in press). Such programs also structure activities that allow adolescents to take active roles in planning activities and events, monitoring progress towards a goal, and problem-solving when faced with obstacles (Larson & Hanson, 2005; Larson, Hanson, & Moneta, 2006). Connecting youth with these opportunities may increase their ability to initiate conversations and activities regarding college preparation and effectively seek out the support they need.

**Limitations and future directions.** The present findings generate additional research questions regarding the college preparation of Latino youth. As with all qualitative research, it is important that the present work be replicated in additional settings in order to assess the generalizability of students’ experiences. While the interviews presented here provide critical insights concerning the ways in which youth attending this high school access information and resources for college, the findings may not extend to adolescents from other locations. Further research is needed in order to determine if the present findings are specific to the students attending the high school included in this study or if they generalize to other youth attending high schools in urban, poor neighborhoods.

The present work also provides an illustration of college preparation at one time point in adolescents’ educational lives. Students in the present sample were enrolled in the ninth grade and interviews took place at the end of the first semester of school. The next three years of high school may dramatically impact the preparation of these youth for higher education. The Academically Focused students may receive the specific

information they need to successfully complete the college application process and make decisions regarding their educational futures. Their enrollment in higher education may not differ from the College-Informed students who are already engaged in obtaining information about college. Similarly, Struggling students may have the opportunity to develop personal relationships once they become acclimated to the school building and school staff. They may also cognitively mature and develop the skills required to engage in agency and seek out the assistance they need. Again, it is unclear what these students' enrollment patterns may eventually be. Future work must attend to the need for longitudinal studies that assess the implications of different levels of college preparation early in students' high school careers.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Conclusion**

The academic decisions that adolescents make have important consequences for the rest of their lives. The plan to pursue higher education and the academic choices that make such goals possible can dramatically influence an individual's life trajectory. A student's goals, values, and behaviors each constitute an important component of college orientation and the first step towards the college process and eventual enrollment (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Understanding the college orientation of Latino youth and the factors that promote such aspirations is particularly important as these adolescents are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

It is also critical that we begin to explore different stages of the college preparation process and the ways in which students turn educational goals into college enrollment. Numerous researchers and policymakers highlight the importance of early preparation suggesting that students must begin planning for post-secondary education during middle school and the early years of high school (Conley, 2007). This work emphasizes the significance of course-taking patterns and the long-term effects of enrolling in non-college preparatory courses (Wimberley & Noeth, 2005). This is perhaps most notable in the area of mathematics where students' course-taking patterns in high school can affect their college eligibility (Cooper et al, 2002). Despite the demonstrated importance of preparing for college early on, little is known about the activities that constitute this stage of the college preparation process beyond course-taking patterns and general academic achievement. How do adolescents access information regarding the course requirements for college and ensure that they are enrolled in college preparatory

coursework? Are there additional conversations and actions during the early years of high school that prepare youth for college access and success?

The goal of the present research was to expand our knowledge of the ways in which Latino youth access support and guidance as they develop and pursue their educational goals. The results of the quantitative study make important contributions to the current literature by identifying the unique roles different individuals play in students' college orientation. Such findings are of particular importance to policymakers and practitioners whose aim is to increase the educational attainment of Latino youth. These individuals work within contexts characterized by financial and other resource constraints. A deeper understanding of the impact of different sources of support may help policies and programs target their efforts more effectively. Indeed, the present study suggests that the college preparation of Latino youth can be enhanced by leveraging the support of particular individuals for specific outcomes.

The findings of the qualitative study complement this work and provide insight concerning the content and nature of the support students receive. The benefit of qualitative analysis is its ability to provide rich descriptions of students' lives. While the quantitative study identifies the unique role of different individuals in the college orientation of youth, the qualitative study highlights how these roles are instantiated and experienced. Students differentially conceive of the college preparation process including the part that various individuals should play as well as their own participation. These different conceptualizations advantage some youth and disadvantage others. It is important that people, policies, and programs acknowledge these differences and ensure that all students understand successful forms of college preparation. This may be done

through the development and delivery of messages that capitalize on important individuals and their ability to shape adolescents' college preparation process.

Throughout both the quantitative and qualitative studies, family members emerged as influential individuals in students' academic lives. The support for college students' received from family members was significantly related to their educational aspirations, expectations, and values. This support was provided by parents, siblings, and extended kin and assumed various forms. Students described family members who provided academic assistance, initiated conversations regarding the importance of college, and helped youth access important information and resources. These conversations and activities were most effective in the context of home environments that were structured around student success. Parents dedicated personal and family resources towards helping their children achieve academically and learn about the college process. Perhaps most evident from the quantitative and qualitative results is the importance of messages that go beyond blanket encouragement to the provision of specific support designed to enable students to achieve their educational goals.

While the support students receive from teachers and school staff was not significantly associated with college orientation in the quantitative study, findings from the qualitative study suggest that these individuals are important sources of information and resources regarding the college process. However, their impact is dependent upon the content of the messages they send and the way in which information is delivered. Similar to the findings regarding family support for college, students benefited when teachers provided specific information about the college preparation process. Discussions that encouraged students to develop college aspirations and reach their potential were not

effective unless they were followed by additional instructions regarding how to achieve those goals. In fact, encouragement for college was so commonplace that many students felt it was an empty message that did not have real personal meaning for them. In order for students to personally engage with teachers' expectations for college attendance, they needed to receive specific information about the college preparation process within the context of close, personal relationships with teachers and school staff. The backdrop of these relationships demonstrated to students that teachers really cared about their personal educational futures and were available for assistance. Unfortunately, many youth in the present study did not have the opportunity to develop strong bonds with these individuals, limiting their role in the college preparation process.

The experiences of several adolescents who participated in the qualitative study highlight the various venues through which schools may disseminate information about college and provide the opportunity for youth to develop close relationships with teachers and school personnel. In addition to counseling offices and classrooms, students learned about college during extracurricular activities. Sports teams were particularly important for some of the youth and they indicated that their coaches were often sources of information regarding scholarships and financial aid. Several students attended afterschool activities specifically designed to increase their preparation for college. These extracurricular programs provided information about various college options, organized college visits, and made youth aware of the requirements for college entrance. They also provided assistance to juniors and seniors during the application process. Such programs were both school-sponsored and community-based, suggesting that partnerships with

neighborhood organizations may be one way for schools to capitalize on available resources in order to increase student enrollment in higher education.

The results from the quantitative study indicate that peers play an important role in students' educational beliefs and academic behavior. Support for college from peers was significantly associated with adolescents' educational values and school effort. The ways in which peers contribute to the attitudes and behavior of youth was further elucidated by the qualitative findings. In contrast to previous work that highlights the negative influence of peers, students in the present study had friends who encouraged their college aspirations, provided academic assistance, and motivated them to achieve. In several cases, peer groups would engage in college preparatory behavior together. They attended college fairs and helped each other search for information about universities of interest. These activities promoted a collective mentality among peer groups that was focused on academic achievement and college planning. Students whose peer networks did not engage in such activities still reported receiving support for educational pursuits. Rarely did peers discourage each other from working hard in school and learning about college.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the present research is its examination of the interplay between contexts of support and individual agency during the college preparation process. Self-efficacy emerged as a powerful influence on students' college orientation in the quantitative study. Indeed, it was the only factor significantly related to all four components of college orientation. Students' experiences, captured by the qualitative interviews, begin to unpack this relationship and advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which self-efficacy impacts college

preparation. While it is impossible to determine causality from qualitative methods, youth differed in the extent to which they believed they would make it to college, the support they received from others, and their own involvement in accessing support. Youth who were confident in their future college enrollment described frequent attempts to learn about higher education which were met with enthusiastic support from family members, teachers, and peers. Youth who were uncertain of their educational expectations reported rarely seeking out information about college and were not offered that support from others. Thus, it appears that successful preparation for college requires a constellation of self-efficacy, student agency, and supportive contexts.

In sum, the research presented here makes important contributions to our understanding of pathways to higher education among Latino youth. This work indicates that these adolescent are supported in their educational aspirations by numerous individuals who play unique roles in their preparation for college. It also suggests that the types of support youth receive and the way this support is communicated makes a difference. Finally, youth play an active role in seeking out the information and resources they need in order to learn about their post-secondary options and what it takes to achieve their educational goals. Despite these conceptual advances, this work is not complete. There are still unanswered questions and the current findings highlight directions for future research. The studies presented here begin to illustrate early adolescents' orientations towards college, but the ways in which these orientations develop and change as youth proceed through high school has yet to be understood.

## **Appendix A**

### Supporting College Trajectories for Latino Youth

#### Interview Protocol

##### ***Introduction***

1. What do you think you'll do after high school? Do you have any plans?
  - a. How did you make that decision?
2. What kind of job would you like to have as an adult? What would be your dream job?
3. Will you need a college degree for that job?
4. Would you like to go to college? Why/Why not?
5. Do you think you will actually be able to go to college?
  - a. What things might help you go?
  - b. What things might make it difficult for you to go?
6. What do you know about college? How did you learn this information?
7. What type of college might you go to? Do you have any in mind? What are some things you might think about when you pick a school?

##### ***College Conversations***

1. Of all the people you know, who would you rely on most to get information about or answer a question about college? Why?

2. If you had a question about the academic requirements for college (e.g. what classes you need to take) would you talk to?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Have you had a conversation with this person about college?
  - c. How did that conversation come about?
  - d. How did that conversation go?
  
3. If you had a question about the college application process who would you talk to?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Have you had a conversation with this person about college?
  - c. How did that conversation come about?
  - d. How did that conversation go?
  
4. If you had a question about financial aid or scholarships for college who would you talk to?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Have you had a conversation with this person about college?
  - c. How did that conversation come about?
  - d. How did that conversation go?

### ***Family***

1. Do your family members want you to go to college?
2. What do your family members do or say that lets you know they want you to go?
3. When you talk to your family members about college, who usually starts the conversation?
4. Has anyone in your family gone to college? Who? Where did they go?
5. Do your parents know about colleges in the U.S.?
6. What other family members know about college?
7. Does anyone in your family tell you not to go to college?

### ***School/Teachers***

1. When you're at school, where do you get information about college?
2. What kinds of things have you learned about college at school?
3. Do the adults at school want you to go to college?
4. What do the adults at school do or say that lets you know they want you to go?
5. Do you talk to any adults at school about college? Who usually starts the conversation?
6. Is there anyone special at school who really encourages you to go to college?
7. Are there things that your school or teachers do that help you go to college?

8. Are there things that your school or teachers do that make it difficult for you to go to college?

***Peers***

1. Do you talk with your friends about what it might be like to go to college? What do you talk about?
2. Do your friends want you to go to college?
3. What do your friends do or say that lets you know they want you to go?
4. What are your close friends thinking about doing after high school?
5. How many of your close friends are thinking about going to college?

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