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“Ganas”: From the individual to the community, and the potential for collective action.

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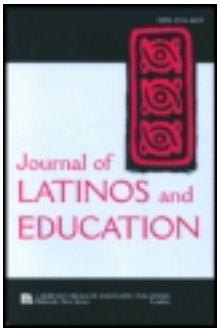

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Ganas: From the Individual to the Community, and the Potential for Improving College Going in the "Land That Texas Forgot"

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Ganas: From the Individual to the Community, and the Potential for Improving College Going in the "Land That Texas Forgot"

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This study explores college-going *ganas* in the South Rio Grande Valley of Texas within the context of Frierian liberatory praxis. During focus groups, current and former high school students discussed their experiences developing *ganas* regarding college going and discussed how parental support was integral to *ganas* formation. The participants also identified structural barriers preventing *ganas* from becoming college going (e.g., teachers handcuffed by standardized testing). Students wanted to change these conditions, demonstrated the ability to organize, but had also been taught that they were incapable of creating social change. Implications are discussed.

Key words: *ganas*, college access, Latina/o students, rural education, border education, higher education

Jaime Escalante, the teacher portrayed in the movie *Stand and Deliver,* was famous for saying that all students needed was *ganas*—the desire and drive to succeed (Escalante & Dirmann, 1990). This concept has been used in understanding Latina/o[1] students' success while also being a pedagogical tool for engaging parents in their child's education (Auerbach, 2007; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Gibson & Bejinez, 2002). Within this formulation, *ganas* is developed within the

[1]For the remainder of this article, we use the term *Latina/o* to refer to all peoples of Latin American heritage while avoiding the sexist assumptions embedded within *Latino.*

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individual; this can lead to resiliency, which helps in overcoming adverse circumstances. This individualized emphasis on *ganas* is problematic because, by inference, Latina/o educational underperformance can become narrowly understood as a lack of student and parent motivation (e.g., Badillo, 2006; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Fundamental questions overlooked in these formulations include the following: How is motivation created? What is the role of differential opportunity structures in the formation of *ganas?*

South Texas's Rio Grande Valley ("The Valley") represents a unique locale to explore *ganas* formation. It is a low-income, majority-Latina/o, border, rural community where high school graduation and college-going rates are substantially lower than in the rest of the state (Texas Education Agency, 2007). These rates of educational attainment are not surprising. Latinas/os pursue higher education at substantially lower rates than their White peers because of a severely inequitable opportunity structure (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Students in rural (Milbourne, 2004) and border (Aleman, 2006; Esparza & Donelson, 2008) communities tend to face educational underfunding relative to those in urban and suburban areas. In addition, rural and border communities are frequently stigmatized locales where educational success is defined as leaving (Jimerson, 2005), which in turn creates a "brain drain" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

Despite these barriers there is potential for *collective* action to address systemic inequalities (Padilla, 2005). Residents of The Valley are familiar with this potential, as there was movement beginning in 1999 to use *promotoras* (community-based, usually female, layperson health educators) as a social infrastructure for improving links between community members and health services (Nichols, Berrios, & Samar, 2005). The impetus behind the current research was to determine the feasibility of utilizing a similar social infrastructure to increase college-going rates throughout The Valley. Within this context, the following questions guided this study:

- How do students in The Valley experience and view their personal *ganas* as it pertains to college going? How did they develop this *ganas?*
- What barriers impede *ganas* from being translated into college going?
- What is the potential for students to organize and change these structural barriers?

Our examination of *ganas* in the majority-Latina/o, rural, border region of South Texas provides additional layers to the discussion of student motivation and success with a focus on the cultural wealth embedded in this community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we review the literature on student motivation/aspiration, college preparedness, and college access within Latina/o communities. Then we highlight how The Valley represents a relatively unique locale (rural, border, Latina/o) and uninvestigated space for exploring *ganas* formation.

The Role of *Ganas* in Latina/o Student College Going

The role of *ganas* as it relates to college going is complex. A Pew Hispanic Center (2009) report found that "all Hispanics ages 16 and older are more likely than the overall U.S. population ages

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16 and older to agree that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life—88% versus 74%" (p. 50). The report further highlighted the fact that valuing a college education is a belief held by not only Latina/o youth but their parents as well (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). These values, however, are not translating into academic expectations. The same report revealed that less than half of Latinas/os between the ages of 18 and 25 *expect* that they will earn a college degree compared to approximately 60% of the non-Latina/o population in this same age range (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The authors argued that the disconnect between values and expectations is a function of immigration, Spanish-dominant language patterns, and financial pressures, all of which depress educational aspirations (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009).

Discrimination can also inhibit *ganas* formation. For example, a longitudinal study of Latina/o adolescents found that perceived discrimination negatively impacted the academic motivation of Latino boys in particular (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009). This is an especially important issue in the K–16 pipeline given the severe underrepresentation of Latino men in higher education (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). However, adults in general, and parents specifically, can play key roles in increasing student academic motivation (Ceja, 2004; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Support from their mothers was particularly important to increasing girls' academic motivation, whereas fathers were integral in developing boys' academic motivation (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006). Teachers were found to be important in developing the academic motivation of both boys and girls, whereas the effects of peers were not significant (Alfaro et al., 2006).

In addition, extracurricular programs meant to promote college going can directly influence Latina/o students' *ganas.* As Gándara and Contreras (2009) argued, "School-based programs alone, especially those that start late, do not appear to raise measured achievement significantly; their primary function appears to be increased motivation and helping students exploit talents they have already developed" (p. 308). Thus, instead of developing a specific set of academic skills, effective supplemental programs develop self-confidence, *ganas,* and a positive sense of self, which leads to behaviors related to college going, such as completing honors courses and taking standardized tests (Gándara, 2002).

Sometimes *Ganas* Just Is Not Enough

A number of factors structurally contribute to Latina/o students' limited access to higher education. Latina/o students in general have historically attended underfunded high schools with underprepared teachers (Fuller & Carpenter, 2008; Gándara, 2005; Valenzuela, 2002, 2005), and in those cases in which they have access to high-performing secondary schools, they have to battle internal segregation (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). It is not surprising that relative to Whites, Latinas/os have to take remedial courses at higher rates, score lower on standardized tests, are underrepresented in Advanced Placement/honors courses, and have higher high school dropout and attrition rates (Contreras, 2005; Johnson, 2007; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). Thus, Latina/o students and parents tend to exist outside of social networks that provide critical information ("college knowledge") on how to access higher education (Auerbach, 2004; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999; Zarate, 2007).

This college knowledge frequently flows to students via high school counselors, and those in low-income and minority areas tend to have the least access to counselors (McDonough, 1997;

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McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Latina/o high school students in particular have decreased access to counselors (Gonzalez et al., 2003), which leads to decreased access to college knowledge (Gándara, 1998, 2002; McDonough, 1997). This knowledge is critically important because, as Bowen and Bok (1998) argue, navigating the college choice process is akin to knowing the "shape of the river." There are a number of unexpected twists and turns, and to effectively maneuver one must possess knowledge to effectively chart a course to college. Latina/o students are more likely than students of any other racial/ethnic group to be the first in their family to attend college (Sáenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007), and thus they frequently find themselves in a double bind: Their parents do not possess the background in higher education to help them navigate the system (i.e., knowing the shape of the river), and the people who do have the knowledge (counselors) are constrained with multiple responsibilities and hundreds of students to serve (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

In addition, concerns about the ability to finance a college education play strongly within Latina/o populations in particular. In 2000, 28% of all Latina/o children in the United States lived in poverty (Llagas & Snyder, 2003); thus, this is a population with limited resources to meet the demands of rising tuition costs (Mumper & Freeman, 2005). This is not purely an economic issue but also a perceptual one (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). As previously highlighted, there is an uneven flow of college information across race and ethnicity (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Without knowledge of financial aid and scholarship opportunities, the perceived cost of college deters many Latina/os from pursuing higher education (McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Nora, 2004; Post, 1990).

The South Texas Context

Texas in general, and South Texas in particular, provides a relatively unique environment for studying Latina/o student college-going *ganas.* The state is still crafting policy responses to the *Hopwood* decision, which banned public uses of affirmative action. The elimination of race-conscious recruitment and admissions policies has inhibited the ability of public colleges and universities in Texas to actively target talented minority students, and there has been a substantial post-*Hopwood* decline in minority enrollment, especially at the flagship institutions (Tienda, Leicht, Sullivan, Maltese, & Lloyd, 2003). In response, the Texas state legislature implemented the Top 10% law, which guarantees admissions to the state's public universities—to students who graduate in the top 10% of their class (Tienda et al., 2003). Although the Top 10% plan has been able to assuage some of the declining minority enrollments in Texas higher education, it is no substitute for race-conscious recruitment and admissions policies (Tienda, 2006). However, the Top 10% plan has promoted the geographic diversity of Texas public higher education, as it has led to the increased enrollment of students from the state's border and rural communities (Montejano, 2001).

Specific to the rural context of The Valley, Aleman (2006) argued that state school finance policies marginalize minority youth via systematic underfunding. In addition, Valenzuela, Fuller, and Vásquez Heilig (2007) noted that the border communities in South Texas have one of the highest concentrations of English language learners in the state and that this group has the lowest high school completion rate in Texas. Amid these conditions, cultural strength becomes a key component of academic success (Lynch, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). One case

study examined education in The Valley, highlighting the fact that the boundary between the community and school is continually blurred. Mexican culture was infused in all aspects of the learning environment, and this pedagogical style created a uniquely supportive type of education within this distinctive region (Lynch, 1997).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIBERATORY PRAXIS

Paulo Freire dedicated his career to exploring and developing what he viewed as the transformative potential of education to combat systemic oppression. This process begins by awakening and developing a critical consciousness among the oppressed (Freire, 2008). This entails developing literacy whereby people learn to read not only the written word but also the frequently invisible power structures and dynamics within society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). From this literacy the oppressed begin to analyze and critique oppressive social conditions. However, this critique is not an end in and of itself. Rather, the critique needs to inform strategic, collective action known as *liberatory praxis.*

Praxis means the intersection of theory and practice, and liberatory praxis is a specific form of this informed action whereby the oppressed liberate themselves and do not, in the process, become the oppressors (Freire, 2000). In Freire's understanding, many people exist as historical *objects,* or those who are acted upon. Through the development of critical consciousness, literacy, and liberatory praxis, the oppressed move to the status of historical *subjects,* or agents of social transformation (Freire, 2000). Within the context of The Valley, this entails an analysis of students' development of critical consciousness with regard to the structures of power that inform their lived experiences. It then involves an interrogation of how these criticisms are or are not translated into collective action meant to improve college readiness in The Valley.

METHODOLOGY

Recruitment, Data, and Sample

Participants for this study came from a larger mixed methods study regarding college readiness and college going in The Valley. For the qualitative component of the research, a range of community members were purposefully recruited (Creswell, 2003) to represent a variety of interested groups, such as students, parents, teachers, and business leaders. Participants were identified through local community groups and agencies, such as the South Texas *Promotora* Association or the Boys & Girls Club, and compensated $25 for their time. Focus groups were conducted using a semistructured interview protocol in which one research team member acted as the facilitator and the other as a detailed note taker. Thematically, the protocol focused on the following categories:

- Perceptions and definitions of college readiness
- How participants came to these understandings of college readiness
- Sources and support structures for promoting college going

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- Barriers preventing the development of college readiness and college going
- The possibility of the creation of a grassroots movement in The Valley aimed at increasing college readiness

In total, 23 stakeholder-specific (e.g., parents or teachers) focus group interviews were conducted with more than 120 community members participating. Focus groups lasted from 75 min to slightly more than 2 hr and were conducted in the participants' preferred language (English, Spanish, or a mix).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and these documents, coupled with detailed facilitator notes, constituted the data for this analysis. In addition, facilitators conducted debriefs after each focus group interview, and these sessions became a key source for data triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For the purposes of this analysis, we chose to use the six focus groups of current ($n = 27$) and former ($n = 9$) high school students representing seven high schools in The Valley (participant $N = 36$; 17 male, 19 female). We were particularly interested in the student voice because students tend to be absent from conversations about education reform, even though the subject of these dialogues is *their* education. All participants identified as Latina/o, except one who was White. One high school student stated that his primary language was Spanish, and all the others were linguistically English dominant.

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Data Analysis

We coded the focus group transcripts thematically, examining *ganas* and whether or not it was being translated into social change. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), "A theme is most commonly understood to be an element that occurs frequently in a text or describes a unique experience that gets at the essence of the phenomenon under inquiry" (p. 89). While generating themes from the text, we conducted three levels of coding. First, we started with *open coding,* reading all transcripts and performing coding on a line-by-line basis to keep ourselves rooted in the data. Second, we conducted *axial coding,* in which we took the open codes and grouped them into more abstract and complex categories. Third, we utilized *selective coding,* or "the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, as cited in Jones et al., 2006, p. 45). We established the validity of the codes through triangulating data sources (transcripts and interview notes) and peer debriefs (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Limitations

There are two primary limitations to the current research. First, focus groups are necessarily limited in their generalizability because of the small number of participants and a purposeful as opposed to random sampling method (Creswell, 2003). The purpose of this research is to provide additional depth to the breadth of the survey research conducted in The Valley. Thus, limited generalizability is not a problem per se but rather imposes a limitation in the discussion and conclusion of the findings, as they are not representative of the area as a whole. Second, and related to the issue of generalizability, those sectors of the population in The Valley with the lowest college-going rates (i.e., those in *colonias*) are also some of the most difficult to access.

Although we were able to interview some students in *colonias,* they were the ones who had the free time to speak with us. They were not the ones who had to continually work to help support the family. Regardless, the existing narratives provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of students in The Valley pursuing higher education.

FINDINGS

We identified three major themes from our analysis of the focus group transcripts: *ganas* and college going, barriers to college going, and the potential for a social movement.

Ganas and College Going

The focus group interviews began with introductions and then a discussion of participants' life goals. This was when participants first discussed *ganas* during these interviews. Participants had a variety of career aspirations, ranging from law, mechanical engineering, astronomy, psychology, nursing, marine biology, to even the military. Whatever their career path, the participants strongly believed that a college education was necessary to realizing their future goals. Even those enlisting in the military saw either that college was part of their advancement within the service or that the military was the means to the end of attaining a college degree. This was true even for those who did not have a strong career path: "I really do know that I do want to college, I'm just not sure what I want to major in yet" (female, high school student).

Ultimately, the students saw themselves as the ones responsible for making the dream of college a reality. They understood that teachers, parents, and counselors played roles in disseminating information and providing guidance, but ultimately it was the students' responsibility to find college-related information, as demonstrated by male and female high school focus group participants:

> Female: There is a lot of information out there, but we . . . it's our job to go and find out. There's a lot.
> Male: It's our responsibility.
> Female: Yeah.

Although it is easy to profess a desire to go to college, one focus group of high school students actually put their *ganas* into practice during the course of the interview. In the final third of their focus group the participants ceased talking about college readiness and began probing the research team for information about college. Their questions focused on issues of college requirements, how to prepare academically, and financial aid. These questions were prefaced with students telling the research team that their parents wanted them to attend college but also that they lacked the specific college knowledge to make this a reality.

Frequently, the parental *ganas* preceded the child's. Virtually all parents of participants had *not* attended college, but they wanted their children to attend.[2] For example, the following focus group participant highlighted how she had the *ganas* to pursue higher education, but her father

[2]There was a tension regarding the role of parents in the college-going process because many parents wanted their children, especially their female children, to stay close to home. Because this was an issue of which college to attend

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played an integral role in this process as well: "I always wanted to go to school, but I didn't have a choice either. Yeah, my dad's been talking to us about our college plans since junior high . . ." (female, college student).

Other students related similar experiences regarding how their parents continually reinforced and pushed the goal of college in their lives. As one participant related, "Yeah, [going to college] is not an expectation, it's like a standard. My dad will not get off of me if I don't get the grades that he wants" (male, high school student). The participants consistently said that these familial conversations began at a very young age, as many reported their parents stressing college as early as grade school. The parents wanted their children to go to college and personally invested time and energy into making this become a reality. This entailed constantly pushing for good grades and talking about the importance of college going "because [my parents] don't want me to end up being like them" (male, high school student).

Although this may seem a little overbearing, the parents had good reason to push their children toward this goal. Most of the parents of focus group participants had few economic opportunities because of their limited educational attainment (many had not completed high school). They deeply wanted to provide their children with greater opportunities than they had, which put an incredible pressure on the students to succeed:

> . . . My parents were like, "You're going to college. You're going to college." So since I grew up with that, it was always my first priority to finish high school and go straight to college. And I'm the oldest in all my family, both my mom's side and my dad's side, so I was the first to graduate from high school of all my cousins. So I had a big load on my shoulders and when I left. (female, college student)

This pressure stemmed from parental *ganas* for their children to have increased opportunities relative to themselves. In the case of this student, her college success was important not only for her but also for her siblings and cousins. She was the family trailblazer whose responsibility it was to open academic doors for herself while making sure they remained open for the rest of her family. However, *ganas* was not entirely able to overcome the structural barriers participants identified.

Barriers to College Access

The primary barriers students encountered involved financial difficulties, teachers limited in their abilities to teach college knowledge, and the inaccessibility of counselors.

Financial barriers. The most common barrier to higher education access across focus groups was money. Although students tended to believe that everyone should be given the *option* to attend college, the cost of higher education weighed heavily on the participants' minds. This was especially important for participants who came from low-income households and whose parents had not attended college. Thus, there was a severe lack of both resources and financial literacy. One student shared a personal story of how such financial barriers prevented her academically prepared aunt from attending college:

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instead of whether to attend college, we omitted this issue from the discussion. It is still a major issue students have to navigate in The Valley, but it was only tangentially related to the purpose of this article.

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> [Money is] a very big issue . . . because I think most of us could get the grades and take the tests and do everything else they require, but when it comes down to it, I think money is the great big issue. That's why I think one of my aunts wasn't able to go to college, because of money. (female, high school student)

For her, the financial issue was not a theoretical issue but a tangible reality. She saw her academically eligible aunt as incapable of making tuition because of her family's low income.

Other focus group participants were more explicit about their personal need for increased financial aid literacy. One participant shared how it was common for his peers to know very little about financial aid: "[Students are] just so poorly informed about what these resources are and what they can do . . . especially down here . . . the mean income levels, people just aren't well informed" (male, former high school student). Because of the importance of finances in supporting a college education, he believed this lack of information led some of his academically capable peers away from higher education.

Instructional barriers. Focus group participants frequently saw teachers as potential brokers of college information who were concurrently handcuffed because of a school-wide emphasis on standardized testing. There was no direct question about testing, but when discussing barriers to developing college readiness, the participants consistently highlighted this issue. Participants shared how high school courses were heavily focused on preparing students for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exams, and many felt shortchanged in their course instruction. One former high school student specifically focused on the issue of critical thinking in relation to gaining access and persisting in college. As a former student from The Valley, she saw the culture of testing as antithetical to the development of critical thinking and to college access:

> And that's the key right there. That's [testing] probably the biggest barrier between high school and college, absolutely . . . you come out of high school with absolutely zero critical-thinking skills whatsoever. They never . . . I don't think I ever did a single assignment in high school that required any sense of critical thinking, ever, and I took all [Advanced Placement] courses all the way through. (female, college student)

In her retrospective analysis, she did not see high school as serving her larger goal of earning a college degree. Rather, she became proficient at test taking, a skill that can actually undermine academic development (McNeil, 2000).

One participant explained how a group of proactive teachers in his school would integrate college preparation and assignments into their courses. These teachers required students to research colleges, find admissions requirements, and complete their applications. Additional exercises also helped students to explore and consider different major options as well as prepare for college-level academic expectations:

> [These teachers were] always going against the curriculum, switching out days of bookwork to say, "Alright, let's read this book because freshman English . . . college is going to have this," or "You're going to take freshman history and you gotta do this," and they just didn't want to focus on the [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] test stuff. They tried to say, "Alright, you're going to college. You're not just going to get a high school education and go flip burgers somewhere." Yeah, and . . . they just got in trouble for switching the curriculum . . . switching the curriculum of what they're doing, they got in trouble for that. (male, high school student)

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According to this participant, his teachers faced punitive consequences stemming from changing the curriculum to incorporate the development of college knowledge. Thus, he viewed his teachers as limited in their abilities to promote college aspirations. Yet teachers were not the only ones who were limited in their abilities to serve the college needs of the students.

Counselor (in)accessibility. Both current and former students also mentioned that there were challenges to receiving college information from not just their teachers but their high school counselors. Many students felt that there were too few school counselors given the number of students in their respective schools, making it difficult for students to receive guidance. Many participants felt that the multiple tasks counselors have to handle, such as discipline and scheduling, reduced the amount of time they could dedicate to college guidance:

> Because my counselor, I would ask him so many questions and he would always be rushed and I feel like I'm not getting anything more. I would try to ask him, ask him, and he'd be looking at the computer everyday. (female, high school student)

Many participants shared similar experiences of feeling rushed when meeting with counselors as a result of time constraints.

Participants also felt that when counselors did focus on college, most of the time was centered heavily on both seniors and the most academically prepared students. They also related how counselor time constraints led to errors. One female high school student offered the following:

> Female: My counselor was putting me in an English that I had already taken, so I almost missed that, but I got it fixed I guess.
> Interviewer: Why did your counselor do that?
> Female: I don't know. I guess because they have a lot of work to do.

Personnel shortages also made it difficult for students to build relationships with their counselors because of the lack of consistent contact. Many participants felt that the development of interpersonal relationships was integral to effective counseling, but interactions with counselors were consistently terse. These critiques are important, but they are insufficient if the purpose of this research is to create social change. With this in mind, we examined the potential for collective action in The Valley aimed at increasing college going.

The Potential for Collective Action

To move the discussion from criticism to praxis, we asked the students about the potential for a collective movement aimed at increasing college going in The Valley. There have been other social movements in The Valley aimed at addressing health disparities (Nichols et al., 2005), so the concept of collective action was not new to the area. What is interesting is that neither current nor former students had considered the possibility of a social movement meant to address educational inequity in their home areas. The very question of a social movement caught some participants off guard. As a former student from The Valley said, "You're the first people I hear talk about it" (male, college student).

The participants offered several reasons why a social movement would not succeed. Many of the current students focused on what they viewed as difficulty uniting their peers. One offered,

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> I just don't think that there's enough people to really bring a movement that size to get everybody ready or get a group of us ready. Like I could see one or two people at my school saying, "Alright, I'll help you out," but especially at my school, not a lot of people help each other. (male, high school student)

One of his female peers elaborated on the cliques that existed at their high school: "You could be friends one week and the next week . . . I mean, you're not talking to the person" (female, high school student).

Students were taught that if they wanted something changed in their lives, it could only be addressed through their parents. As one participant argued, "The school doesn't listen. I've known friends that are requesting, 'I want this class because I know it's going to help me,' but they won't put them in that class unless the parent comes down screaming at the principal" (female, high school student). The students tended to feel individually and collectively disempowered, incapable of creating social change. These assertions regarding collectivism were curious when juxtaposed against narratives the students offered regarding conflicts they experienced with school administrators. The participants in one focus group of high school students were very upset about the district implementing a mandatory dress code. One offered the following account:

> For the dress code, we had posters, there were a bunch of us. Then security comes and cops are passing by but don't tell us anything and then security comes, we had a camera, our friend had a camera to record everybody and security comes in front of us and he has a camera and he is recording us right? And then my friend who had the camera was like, as you can see the cop is recording us and we are recording him. We are not doing anything wrong. We are just protesting. Then he said, if you don't get to school right now we will call the cops and you will get suspended. (female, high school student)

This student and her peers were willing to put themselves at personal risk because they felt strongly about the dress code. They took collective action in hopes of challenging it. Another student in the same focus group took her case to the school board, making the argument that neither students nor teachers approved of the idea. This was curious behavior coming from students who had spent the previous 15 min telling the facilitators how collective action promoting college going would fail.

Another focus group of high school students discussed the revolving door of principals in their high school and their collective responsibility for the situation. They focused on one principal in particular:

> Female 1: We ran off the first [principal].
> Interviewer: You ran off the first one? When you say you ran off, is it that you students came together . . .
> Female 2: Yeah, all of the seniors, they sent text messages and on our pep rallies, we would boo the principal and . . .
> Female 1: Like he would come up and it was like, "Boo," and . . .
> Female 2: We would throw papers and . . . I mean, he finally left.
> Interviewer: Now check this out. What you just described, that is collective action right there.

Unified against a common foe (principal or dress code), the students demonstrated the potential for the creation of a social movement. Whether or not these actions represent positive change is irrelevant. It was not until this link was made explicit by the facilitator ("that is collective action right there") that the students saw themselves as potential agents of social change.

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DISCUSSION

The narratives of these students demonstrate that they and their parents possessed *ganas* regarding the pursuit of higher education. They understood a bachelor's degree to be a means to the end of economic security, and this was especially important to parents who did not want their children to have to struggle as they did. The participants reported their parents pushing them to succeed in high school and attend college. This developed *ganas* within the participants to pursue a college education while contradicting popular notions that Latinas/os do not value education (e.g., Badillo, 2006; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

This *ganas* created a tension for some students because the same parents who emphasized college frequently did not have the background knowledge necessary to help their children navigate the "shape of the river" (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Minimal college knowledge led to a reliance upon school actors to help guide students, and this is where most of the participants focused their critiques. They understood that college was not for all, but their concern was that this choice was being made for students in The Valley because of an inequitable opportunity structure. They highlighted teachers who were limited in their abilities to teach about college because of an emphasis on standardized testing. This resulted in a narrowing of curricula that undermined students' access to critical-thinking skills and college preparation (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). In addition, counselor inaccessibility was especially important for first-generation college students as "college counselors represent one of the single most important forms of college and financial aid information for lower income children and their families" (McDonough & Calderone, 2006, p. 1705).

There was a pressing need for social change, but the students were systematically taught that their voice did not matter and that collective action was not feasible. Regardless, it is imperative to have the student voice present as the college-going movement develops. Incorporating students increases their sense of engagement, thereby increasing the efficacy of the movement because action taken *for* someone is less effective than that taken *with* someone (Freire, 2000). If the community stakeholders are going to meet the needs of the students, they need to understand what these needs are. This process involves dialogue in which both sides view each other as allies in a collective movement for social change (Freire, 2008). Students made a number of strong structural critiques regarding barriers to the flow of college-related information, and these need to be incorporated into the overall agenda of community social change.

The positionality of the students should not be romanticized, as it would be a mistake to assume that they have all of the answers. Rather, the voices of the students need to be taken seriously as the community organizes to increase college going. At the very least, listening and engaging can be the first step to student empowerment, promoting increased investment in students' education. Participants consistently said that nothing changed in their high schools unless parents raised the issue. This serves to both silence the student voice as well as tell students that they are unimportant members of the community. This is in direct contradiction to findings from the larger project that almost all saw their future well-being tied to increasing the level of education in the community (Sáenz, Najera, & Ozuna, 2009; Sáenz et al., 2008; Yamamura & Martinez, 2009).

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