

## Funds of Knowledge: An Approach to Studying Latina(o) Students' Transition to College

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A feature of the existing literature on minority students' transition to college is the preponderance of models that have "imagined" what students (and their families) need to have in order to be successful. In this paper we discuss how the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge can be used by researchers in higher education to challenge these models and to study Latina(o) students' college preparation, college access, and development of career aspirations.

Key words: funds of knowledge, college preparation, college access, career aspirations, Latinao educational opportunity

The United States is more racially and ethnically diverse today than at any other time in its history, and the near future promises a continuation of this trend (Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). The fastest growing youth populations, including Latina(o)s, are those who have been the least well served by the educational system from K–12 to postsecondary school (García & Figueroa, 2002). They are the underrepresented minority and lower income youth who are less likely than their White, higher income peers to graduate from high school (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004), to go to college (Perna, 2000), and to complete college (Swail et al., 2004). Thus, the significance of higher education to the Latina(o) population cannot be overstated. Indeed, for poor and working-class Latina(o)s, who constitute the majority of the Latina(o) population in the United States, a college degree is an important route to a professional career, a well-paying job, and a better life (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991).

Despite efforts to increase college access, college enrollment and completion rates remain stratified by socioeconomic status (Titus, 2006) and by race and ethnicity (Baum & Ma, 2007). For example, Latina(o)s represented almost 14% of high school graduates in the 2004–2005 academic year but received only 11% of associate's degrees, 7% of bachelor's degrees, 5% of master's degrees, 5% of first-professional degrees, and just 3% of doctoral degrees awarded in

the 2005–2006 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Moreover, Marin et al. (2008) found that although more minorities are attending college, many do not graduate. Indeed, they found that the percentage of Hispanic high school graduates entering college increased from 47% in 1972 to 70% in 1992; at the same time, the percentage of Hispanics completing college declined from 40% in 1975 to 34% in 2004.

A distinguishing characteristic of most of the existing literature on minority students' transition to college is the preponderance of models—economic and sociological—that assume that the transition to college is a linear process (Perna, 2006). In other occasions, these models suggest that something is *wrong* with students (and their families) simply because they are perceived to not have the characteristics, the capital, and the resources needed to participate and to succeed in college. As argued by Bensimon (2007), the scholarship in higher education has “imagined” (Moll, 2000) what students need to have and to do to be successful based on what these dominant models have found to be important factors associated with access to college. Consequently, the existing “politics of representation” (Holquist, 1983) have *not* resulted in increased college attendance and completion rates among minority students, including Latina(o)s.

In this article we discuss how the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge—the existing resources, knowledge, and skills embedded in students and their families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992)—can guide researchers in higher education as they conduct research on Latina(o) students' transition to college. We concentrate our attention on examining specific components of the transition to college among Latina(o) students: (a) college preparation, (b) college access, and (c) the development of career aspirations. We are aware that there are other components of the transition to college—college persistence and success—that are not covered in this paper.

We first review the existing literature on college opportunity and the transition to college. Next we discuss and critique some of the most dominant conceptual frameworks used to study students' transition to college. Next we briefly examine the origins of the concept of funds of knowledge. Then we discuss how funds of knowledge can be used by researchers in higher education to study Latina(o) students' transition to college. In doing so we rely heavily on existing research on funds of knowledge as well as on our own work with different samples of Latina(o) students and families. Immediately following this we discuss the limitations of using a funds of knowledge approach in higher education. We conclude by offering a research agenda that promises to close existing knowledge gaps.

## LATINA(O) COLLEGE ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

Studies spanning nearly 15 years have indicated that although Latina(o) students and families are likely to emphasize the importance of a college education, students often do not complete a 2- or 4-year degree (Immerwahr, 2003). This disconnect has resulted in a number of outcomes, including a nontransition from middle to high school at rates of 48% to 55%, with half of the students who do continue to high school leaving prior to graduation (Oliva & Nora, 2004). It is estimated that of the Latina(o) students who graduate from high school, only 35% will continue on to college (Oliva & Nora, 2004). Two-year colleges are often the starting point for Latina(o) students, who enroll at disproportionate numbers compared with other groups (58% vs. 40% of all 18- to 24 year-olds in the year 2000; Gándara, 2005). Unfortunately, the fact remains that

transfer rates from community colleges to 4-year institutions are low (between 20% and 25%), and dropout rates from the freshmen to sophomore year remain high (between 55% and 65%; Oliva & Nora, 2004).

Sadly, in many studies, one sees responsibility and blame placed on the Latina(o) student (and his or her family) with no acknowledgment of the institutional barriers associated with college opportunity for this population. In reality, institutional forces and systemic barriers also create many of the roadblocks to college attainment for minority students (Deil-Amen & López Turley, 2007). Such is the case with policies directly impacting the enrollment of Latina(o) students based on race/ethnicity (such as Proposition 209 in California) or based on state residency status (such as Proposition 300 in Arizona). Flores, Horn, and Crisp (2006) explained that both old and new policies restrict college-going opportunities for undocumented Latina(o) immigrants. K–12 schools present another set of barriers for Latina(o) students, as variations exist in the investment in and expectations of Latina(o) students by school personnel. Often these expectations are low and impact students' ability to navigate courses, college requirements, and school structures, ultimately channeling students into a less rigorous and non-college track curriculum (K. González, Stone, & Jovel, 2003; Martinez, 2003).

It is clear that Latina(o) students are not attending or graduating from college at the same rate as their peers. It is also evident that a number of factors affect students' transition to college. We focus the next section of this paper on discussing existing conceptual frameworks that have been used to study the transition to college among underrepresented students, including Latina(o)s.

## LATINA(O) STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Most of the literature that examines students' transition to college focuses its attention on individual-level explanations for why certain students do not do as well as others. Such work focuses on factors, including students' socioeconomic status, academic preparation, motivation, or college-choice processes, that sometimes presume student or family deficiencies with respect to their ability to do what is necessary to achieve desired academic outcomes (Oliva, 2008). In what follows we present two approaches that have been extensively used to examine students' transition to college.

### The Economic Approach

In an attempt to explain students' transition to college, considerable economic research has emerged (Perna, 2006). A number of researchers (e.g., Paulsen, 1990) have used economic models of human capital investment to examine students' college choices. In particular, human capital models examine how students make choices of whether or not to attend college based on certain information, including college prices and financial aid. Moreover, these models suggest that information is crucial because it is associated with numerous outcomes, such as college expectations, application, enrollment, and choice (Perna, 2000, 2006). Research along this line of inquiry has also shown that parents and students, particularly African Americans and Latina(o)s, are

uninformed or poorly informed, even when they expect or plan to attend college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Although these models have provided insight into how students make decisions about going to college, they lack a clear understanding of how information and other nonmonetary factors, such as exchanges of ideas and access to certain social networks, influence students' decision to go to college.

### Sociological Approaches

In addition to human capital models, the transition to college literature in sociology reflects the dominance of the status attainment model (Deil-Amen & López Turley, 2007). The status attainment model focuses on analyzing the effect of socioeconomic status on students' educational attainment. Findings from this line of inquiry suggest that socioeconomic status is the most important factor associated with students' outcomes, including academic achievement and post-secondary outcomes (Sewell, 1971). More recent sociological research has focused on the ways in which the sociological constructs of cultural and social capital influence students' transition to college (Cabrera et al., 2006; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005).

*Cultural capital* refers to the system of qualities, such as language skills and cultural knowledge, that is derived, in part, from one's family and that defines a person's class position (Bourdieu, 1986). According to this framework, students of lower socioeconomic status are disadvantaged in the competition for academic rewards because their sociocultural environment may not provide the types of cultural capital required for success in school, such as academic attention, certain linguistic patterns, behavioral traits, orientation toward schooling, high expectations, or encouragement of college aspirations (Cabrera et al., 2006; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

Social capital is composed of contacts and memberships in networks that can be used for personal gain (Bourdieu, 1986). Researchers (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2006; K. González et al., 2003; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005) have found that students who lack access to specific forms of social capital may have decreased chances of attending college. In sum, empirical studies that use these sociological approaches provide evidence that family background and social and cultural capital have a significant impact on educational aspirations, persistence, and attainment from the earliest schooling experiences through high school to college (Walpole, 2003).

### Critiques of the Economic and Sociological Approaches

A considerable amount of research on students' transition to college has emerged; nevertheless, we argue that existing capital frameworks are insufficient to understand the complexities embedded in this process, particularly for Latina(o) students. In what follows we offer a critique of both approaches.

Rational choice theory (Becker, 1976), on which human capital theory is based, argues that human behavior is governed by the principle of maximization of goals (e.g., college attendance) under given constraints (e.g., constraints related to time and financial resources). In other words, the theory suggests that youth act as "adolescent econometricians" (Beattie, 2002, p. 19) as they evaluate the benefits of further education in terms of the income increase that would result from their gains in human capital—knowledge and skills. The rational choice model is based

on a set of assumptions that need to be questioned, particularly when referring to minority students, including Latina(o)s. First, the rational choice theorist often presumes that the individual decision-making unit in question, usually the student, is “typical” or “representative” of some larger group (e.g., Latina[o]s). There is great heterogeneity among Latina(o) students, so having one econometric model for all Latina(o)s is probably not helpful in understanding how they make decisions related to college enrollment. Researchers need be cautious in taking findings from one subgroup of Latina(o) students and translating them to another subgroup. Second, it is assumed that the individual student is the *only* one who decides how much to invest in his or her education. The existing literature on higher education has strongly advocated for such an individualistic approach despite a variety of studies (e.g., Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004; Pérez & McDonough, 2008) that show how important other contexts, including the influence of many family members and peers, are in minority students’ decisions to attend and to succeed in college.

Third, rational choice models assume that individuals choose their preferred option among a set of alternatives. But most Latina(o) students living in economically poor conditions rarely face the opportunity to choose among several options. Indeed, these students tend to attend schools characterized by high levels of poverty and low quality. Deil-Amen and López Turley (2007) clearly pointed out that schools, as educational institutions, interact with other contexts (e.g., family and neighborhoods) to potentially reinforce existing inequalities. What this means for students attending schools with the characteristics mentioned previously is that they do *not* have as many options as their peers to attend a wide variety of colleges and universities. Furthermore, there is empirical evidence to suggest that it is theoretically problematic to assume that all youth form expectations about future outcomes in the same way (Beattie, 2002). It is very likely that the rational choice model does not reflect the number of concrete opportunities that minority students have to attend college (and, presumably, to improve their quality of life).

In contrast, sociological approaches shed light on the ways in which students’ (and families’) social and cultural capital affect students’ chances of attending college. For example, studies (e.g., Perna & Titus, 2005) have found that social capital (primarily understood as parent involvement) influences college attendance. Nevertheless, these findings need to be carefully reviewed because social capital is generally operationalized using just one indicator rather than a multi-dimensional construct (Perna & Titus, 2005). Exceptions do exist, and one such example is the work of Stanton-Salazar (2001), who used the concepts of social capital, social networks, and a help-seeking orientation to understand the educational experiences of low-income Mexican students. Findings showed how elements of a student’s experience (community, school, families) are organized to reproduce social inequality, how networks can lead to resource sharing and exclusion, and how human bridges and advocacy are important in creating access to new educational opportunities and resources.

Similarly, researchers (e.g., Nora, 2004; Perna, 2000) have found that cultural capital—a composite of cultural activities, attitudes, and knowledge—influences students’ decisions to attend college. The use of such proxies can result in promoting a specific representation of students (and their families) as “deficient, disinterested, with confused priorities, and responsible for their youth’s failure to enter college” (Knight et al., 2004, p. 100). This deficit perspective states that lower class culture has distinct values and forms of social organization. Although their interpretations vary, most of the research studies that use such proxies suggest that lower class and working-class families do not value education as highly as middle-class families do (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Another critical assumption of existing sociological approaches is that educationally successful groups possess social and cultural capital by virtue of their success; those groups that are not as successful, meaning those not going to college, are assumed to lack these forms of capital to be able to do better if only they possessed and/or acquired more of it. This retrospective analysis of social and cultural capital often remains bound in the context of structural resources and interests rather than accounting for the ways in which students (and their families) navigate their interests in between and in spite of structural constraints (Camarrota, Moll, Cannella, & González, 2010).

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that educational research on social and cultural capital continues to pay considerable attention to adopting and operationalizing these terms rather than modifying the theory and applying it to various U.S. contexts—not only the upper class but a broad range of social classes and racial/ethnic groups. Finally, with some exceptions (e.g., K. González et al., 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), studies that use sociological approaches to examine Latina(o) students' transition to college use *individuals* or *parents* as their primary unit of analysis. These approaches severely limit who should be involved in youths' college-going process, inaccurately perpetuating the worldviews that all students are solely raised and supported by their parents (Knight et al., 2004).

We argue here that in order for experts to fully understand Latina(o) students' transition to college, dominant models must be challenged, and students and their families need to be studied from integrated perspectives. It is important to state that we are not arguing that economic and sociological perspectives should not be utilized to examine Latina(o) students' transition to college. Instead, we argue for the need to use multiple perspectives to advance an understanding of a very complex process. In particular, we claim that incorporating a funds of knowledge approach to study the transition to college among Latina(o)s will improve our understanding of power and equity in educational opportunity.

## FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

### Funds of Knowledge: Origins and the Study of Household Practices

The concept of funds of knowledge was first introduced by anthropologists Carlos Vélez-Ibañez and James Greenberg (1992) as part of their household analysis of working-class Mexican families in the southwestern United States. In particular, they studied how working-class and economically marginalized families used their social networks, and the social and economic exchange relations that such networks facilitate, to mediate the uncertainty of their socioeconomic disadvantage. Funds of knowledge, then, were described in this work as an array of knowledge and skills that are of strategic importance to working-class households living in the U.S.–Mexico border region (Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992). For example, many Mexican households have accumulated a wide breadth of knowledge in areas such as mining and metallurgy, ranching and animal husbandry, and trans-border transactions related to their sector of the economy in their particular region of the country (Moll et al., 1992). Other types of such funds include information concerning access to institutional assistance, legal help, occupational opportunities, and the most inexpensive places to procure needed goods and services. The theoretical framework of funds of knowledge has primarily been used by researchers, mostly in the K–12 sector, to document the wealth of knowledge existing in low-income households, to help

teachers link the school curriculum to students' lives (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, in press), and to challenge the deficit model that has characterized much educational theorizing about low-income children and families (Olmedo, 1997).

### Funds of Knowledge in the Scholarship of Higher Education

In her presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Bensimon (2007) noted "a lack of scholarly and practical attention toward understanding how the practitioner—her knowledge, beliefs, experiences, education, sense of self-efficacy, etc.—affects how students experience their education" (p. 444). Bensimon highlighted the role that funds of knowledge play in helping faculty to see students and families in terms of possibilities. Thus, countering the negative representations of minority students, usually known for such characteristics as speaking language(s) other than English, living in households with either one or many adults, and working too many hours—highly correlated with "risk" in educational research is critical to help students (and their families and communities) to succeed in school and in life. Most important, Bensimon encouraged researchers in higher education to use a conceptual framework that could assist in understanding how funds of knowledge shape faculty practices. Bensimon's article is the first attempt to use a funds of knowledge perspective in the scholarship of higher education. However, we argue here that this is not the only way that researchers can use funds of knowledge to study issues in higher education. The following sections discuss an alternative approach.

### FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE: A PROPOSED APPROACH TO STUDYING LATINA(O) STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

We have stated here that there is a need for research that examines how households' funds of knowledge affect students' transition to college, particularly among Latina(o)s. By no means are we suggesting that using a funds of knowledge approach is the panacea for all of the problems related to the transition to college. Indeed, there is a need to critically examine what funds of knowledge can (and cannot) do to improve researchers' understanding of students' transition to college.

#### The Influence of Funds of Knowledge on College Preparation Among Latina(o) Students

The literature on college preparation typically focuses on academic achievement, which is usually measured by grades and coursework (Deil-Amen & López Turley, 2007). Findings suggest that a number of individual attributes (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnicity) are associated with Latina(o) students' academic achievement (Portes, 2000). Without any doubt, these studies have contributed to explaining some variation in Latina(o) students' academic achievement. However, several other resources that affect college preparation have not been taken into consideration, and thus a large proportion of the variation in the academic achievement of students remains unexplained. For this reason, in what follows we provide a discussion of how funds of knowledge can inform research on college preparation. Specifically, we focus our attention on two issues: (a) the choice of the unit of analysis and (b) the analysis of variation in funds

of knowledge. To illustrate these points, we rely on empirical data (previously collected) that examine the relationship between households' funds of knowledge and Latina(o) students' academic and nonacademic outcomes (see Rios-Aguilar, 2010, for methodological details for the data presented here).

*Unit of analysis: The role of households in the college preparation of Latina(o) students.* Most research in higher education (e.g., Tierney & Auerbach, 2004) has focused on the influence of attributes such as parental involvement on students' college preparation. Yet varying notions of involvement have different impacts on the academic outcomes of students from different ethnicities (López, Barrueco, Feinauer, & Miles, 2007). In addition, most studies on college preparation focus on parent characteristics (e.g., level of education) and activities (e.g., attending school activities and visiting college campuses) that may not reflect the many influences embedded in the contexts of Latina(o) students' lives. Thus, we propose to use a household approach such as the one used in existing research on funds of knowledge.

To support the claim that a household approach is needed, we rely on empirical research on funds of knowledge that was previously conducted. Table 1 is an illustration of the diverse household configurations in which Latina(o) students are embedded. One type of household is a more traditional configuration with two adults living in the household, and the other is a less traditional configuration with more than two adults living in the household (including older children and relatives).

TABLE 1  
Selected Demographic Characteristics of Puerto Rican Households

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Profile 1<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Profile 2<sup>b</sup></i>
Relationship with respondent		
Spouse	67%	11%
Children	14%	58%
Relative	6%	23%
Friend	5%	4%
Other	7%	4%
Country of birth		
Born outside the United States	58%	60%
Level of education		
Elementary	8%	11%
Middle school	23%	19%
High school	44%	43%
Some college	16%	19%
Bachelor's degree	5%	4%
Graduate degree	4%	4%
English proficiency		
Speak English very well	51%	54%
Speak English well	21%	20%
Speak English little	17%	13%
Speak English very little	11%	13%

<sup>a</sup>Two adults living in the household.

<sup>b</sup>Two or more adults living in the household.

Given these household configurations, we claim that researchers in higher education need to think more carefully about how to incorporate households into their analyses as a primary unit of analysis. The first step that needs to be taken is to collect data (both qualitative and quantitative) about Latina(o) households. One way to accomplish this goal is to use more sophisticated methods to examine the influence of distinct household configurations on students' transition to college. If researchers choose a qualitative approach, then they could follow N. González, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) three-interview model to examine the data collected. However, if a statistical approach is selected, then researchers could analyze the household data using appropriate multilevel techniques, such as a cross-classified random effects model (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002, for details). An advantage of using a multilevel approach is that it can examine a student nested simultaneously in different contexts (e.g., households and schools). The data gathering and estimating procedures that we suggest here are very complex. Nevertheless, they represent feasible options that researchers in higher education must explore if they aspire to conduct research that can increase the college enrollment rates of Latina(o)s.

*Examining the variation in households' funds of knowledge.* Unlike existing research that focuses exclusively on certain forms of capital to examine college preparation, in this section we consider some preliminary analyses of the variation in the funds of knowledge existing in Latina(o) households using a random sample of Puerto Rican households (see Rios-Aguilar, 2010, for details on the characteristics of the sample). What we offer here is a descriptive analysis of the richness and diversity embedded in Latina(o) households and how the academic outcomes of students vary according to this diversity.

We focus our examination of variation on two key elements of funds of knowledge: social reciprocity (a measure of the networks of exchange among different Latina(o) households) and household activities (a measure of the type of activities families and students engage in together). The reason for choosing to study the social reciprocity and household routine practices of these families is because it helps to develop a composite and multidimensional index of the range of possible funds of knowledge available in these households (N. González et al., 2005).

Indexes of "intensity" were created for both measures: social reciprocity and household activities. The idea of creating intensity indexes came from an analysis conducted by Deil-Amen, Prabhu, Terenzini, and Cabrera (2005) to assess the effectiveness of intervention programs aimed at increasing college awareness among at-risk students. The intensity indexes can be interpreted as proxies for how *frequently* families received and/or provided help and support to other families and how *frequently* families engaged with students in certain household activities. Table 2 shows the descriptive analyses for the intensity in social reciprocity and household practices. Perhaps the most revealing findings are that (a) there is variation in households' funds of knowledge and (b) there are differences in the academic achievement of Latina(o) students depending on the intensity of social reciprocity and household activities.

The data analyses shown here are limited in several ways. For instance, these analyses are just descriptive (no statistical tests for differences were conducted). They do *not* examine how the varying intensity levels are related to students' academic achievement. In addition, only proxies for students' college preparation were measured and analyzed here. Future research needs to broaden the range of outcomes studied. For example, researchers need to analyze the relationship between funds of knowledge and college attendance and persistence. In addition, researchers must start to examine other noncognitive outcomes (e.g., resiliency and community engagement) that may also be relevant when one is utilizing a funds of knowledge approach.

TABLE 2  
Descriptive Analysis of Intensity in Social Reciprocity Among Latina(o) Households

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Low-Intensity Social Reciprocity (N = 89)</i>	<i>High-Intensity Social Reciprocity (N = 109)</i>	<i>Low-Intensity Household Practices</i>	<i>High-Intensity Household Practices</i>
Characteristics of parents, %				
Female	90	86	92	92
Not born in the United States	55	60	56	56
Occupation				
Office and administrative assistant	24	22	26	26
Manufacturing	13	13	13	13
Services	29	33	32	32
Professional and business	11	13	11	11
Highest level of education completed				
Elementary	7	4	7	7
Middle school	27	28	22	22
High school	39	24	38	38
Some college	18	27	20	20
College	7	15	9	9
English proficiency				
Speak English well or very well	45	45	47	47
Spanish proficiency				
Speak Spanish well or very well	63	60	60	
Characteristics of students, <i>M (SD)</i>				
Stanford achievement performance level (1–4)	2.05 (.46)	1.94 (.41)	2.04 (.53)	2.00 (.37)
English language arts performance level (1–4)	2.05 (.77)	2.48 (.58)	2.12 (.78)	2.32 (.68)
Grade point average (0–4.5)	2.21 (.98)	2.48 (.91)	2.52 (.25)	2.09 (.92)
English literacy outcomes (0–45)	22.14 (13.48)	27.41 (12.2)	19.81 (11.91)	27.79 (13.24)
Spanish literacy outcomes (0–45)	21.53 (14.83)	27.46 (12.8)	17.80 (13.10)	28.94 (13.96)

*Note.* See Rios-Aguilar (2010) for details on the data collected.

## Funds of Knowledge, College Access, and the Development of Career Aspirations

When disaggregating the multiple layers influencing college access and specifically examining the role of families, one sees that Latina(o) families have consistently been represented as deficient. These deficiency beliefs discount parents' values and views about education (Lott, 2001). Oftentimes parents from Latina(o) populations are perceived by school administrators and teachers as resistant to school efforts and uncommitted to their children's learning process. The literature challenging this dominant perspective clearly demonstrates that Latina(o) parents value education (Valencia & Black, 2002). In conducting a study that focused on the funds of knowledge and educational ideologies of six Mexican American families in a university outreach program, Kiyama (2010) found additional evidence that families form college ideologies in a variety of ways, and many times those ideologies serve as positive influences. Findings from the same study also suggest that familial funds of knowledge influence the development of future career aspirations. Thus, the subsequent sections here focus on a discussion of how funds of

knowledge can inform two specific processes: (a) getting into college and (b) the development of career aspirations.

*“Getting in” college: Latino families and college access.* Although dominant frameworks fail to acknowledge the college knowledge present in Latina(o) families, Kiyama’s (2010) work illustrated that families’ knowledge comes from firsthand experiences as well as the experiences of extended family members. Here we share a brief conversation about college costs and financial aid, two factors that might typically be considered a barrier for low-income and Latina(o) families. Although the families in the study acknowledged the financial challenges of attending college, they were determined not to let finances deter their children from “getting in.” In a conversation about potential barriers to college, this mother expressed that she was not concerned about paying for college because she had gone through this process with her husband, who was currently enrolled in classes through the local community college:

Danielle: I went through it [financial aid process] with my husband so I never was scared about that.

Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable looking for financial aid and scholarships?

Danielle: Yeah. Even if they wanted a loan and pay it back when you are done, it doesn’t matter. It gets paid back . . . It doesn’t scare me.

Danielle was familiar with different types of financial aid and knew that loans were available and could be repaid after graduation. Danielle’s experience reminds us that we as researchers cannot continue to assume that families are lacking information about college. Danielle represents just one example of families who have college knowledge, often stemming from direct experiences and extended familial networks. These networks are important in providing information about both K–12 and higher education. Clearly, she was informed about the financial process of “getting in.” It seems reasonable then to claim that researchers in higher education must examine what kinds of knowledge already exist in households and expand on them or help parents activate such knowledge into concrete strategies or actions that will enhance students’ chances of enrolling and succeeding in college.

*Funds of knowledge and the development of career aspirations.* Occupational titles both carry a social status of how one is identified and represent how society values the notion of professional success. Here we share an example of a mother who describes the potential future occupations of her daughter—what the child would like to be and what the mother considers a successful path for her child. Valerie wanted her daughter Aracely (age 7) to go on to college, but she had concrete ideas about what Aracely’s future might look like.

I told her you can go to college and be a cheerleader and go be a teacher. I think her main one was cheerleader/coach type thing—teacher. From what it sounds like it is always going to be teaching something. Teaching other people to do it, and I am kind of saying, no, you are going to be a doctor. You are going to be a lawyer.

Although Aracely enjoys teaching and often plays school at home, Valerie expects that her future will be in a profession that is perceivably more successful. She rationalized this by explaining that Aracely likes to argue; therefore being a lawyer would be a better fit for her. All of the families had ideas about their children pursuing a college education, but their perceptions of

successful careers were often limited by how narrowly professional success is defined in U.S. society. This mirrors the narrow definitions that educational researchers continue to draw upon when linking academic success with academic achievement. In this case, we argue that utilizing a funds of knowledge framework can help people to understand aspirations beyond college and professional aspirations. The framework can also help people to understand how and what career-like characteristics students are developing and experimenting with in the home.

Future research on Latina(o) families must begin to identify how families construct “getting out” of college. Research should also expand upon the role that Latina(o) families play in the retention and graduation processes of their students. Finally, additional research should understand how families create ideologies about career and professional aspirations.

### Limitations of the Funds of Knowledge Approach

The intent of this paper is not to present a new study but instead to continue the discussion on funds of knowledge and highlight how this framework might help people to better understand college readiness, choice, access, and success among Latina(o) students. However, the funds of knowledge framework is not without limitations.

As researchers we must understand the processes of the development and acquisition of funds of knowledge. We currently have well-documented accounts of some of these processes, but we must build upon how, when, and by whom funds of knowledge are negotiated, activated, and expanded upon. It is very likely that in order to help Latina(o) students succeed in college the funds of knowledge approach needs to move from recognizing students to expanding and enriching these sources of knowledge beyond K–12. This begins with developing research with the goal of understanding the social networks of households and how these affect students’ outcomes, including college access and success.

It is difficult to expand upon the types of funds of knowledge found in different types of households without also broadening the concept of the term *household*. However, as researchers introduce funds of knowledge into the college access, transition, and persistence literature they must reconceptualize the notion of “household.” Households may begin to represent significant relationships outside of the family setting and into the collegiate setting. These may extend into residence halls and living/learning communities, fraternity and sorority involvement, and summer transition and retention programs in which a significant sense of community is developed. Finally, the majority of funds of knowledge research has been focused on Latina(o) families. Therefore, researchers’ understanding of funds of knowledge is based on and limited by a Latina(o) perspective. It is important for the development and understanding of funds of knowledge to also include other subgroups of Latina(o) students and other ethnic minority, immigrant, and low-income families.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although we have gained a new perspective on the meaning of various funds of knowledge, we are still restricted in our knowledge of how these funds of knowledge are applied to the transitions into and out of college. Therefore, we propose the following as implications for future research:

1. *Refining units of analysis when studying funds of knowledge.* Future research must begin to incorporate into analyses of funds of knowledge and college access the role that siblings, extended families members, and communities play in this process.
2. *Examining the variation in households' funds of knowledge.* Future research on funds of knowledge needs to continue using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to study different dimensions and variations of funds of knowledge as they apply to academic preparation and college access among Latina(o) students. Further research should expand upon this quantitative approach.
3. *Understanding the role of funds of knowledge in college access and the development of career aspirations.* Future college access research should examine how families construct the processes of getting into *and* getting out of college as well as how families develop career aspirations for their children.

Finally, future research should examine how and if those funds of knowledge are being converted into concrete educational opportunities for children throughout the course of their K–12 experience, into their college-going process, and into their persistence in college.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article we have argued that there is a need to challenge existing frameworks used to study Latina(o) students' transition to college. We urge researchers to focus on the process of unlearning, disrupting, and reframing deficit thinking when it comes to studying Latina(o)s in higher education (Milner, 2007). By doing so, they will create a process of holding themselves more accountable to the students, families, and communities with whom they conduct research, as it is sometimes researchers' own belief systems and preexisting knowledge that contribute to deficit discourses and thinking (Milner, 2007). We aim to build on the recommendations of Milner (2007) and Young (1999), who proposed new frameworks for studying students and families of color, frameworks that challenge researchers to understand, interpret, and represent diverse communities in ways that maintain their integrity and illustrate their strengths. In doing so, we urge researchers in higher education not only to recognize the existence of funds of knowledge but also to assist students and families in expanding their use of funds of knowledge, in accessing other forms of capital (social and cultural capital), and in activating all of these to increase their academic and professional success.

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