

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE TOOLS

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Building on the Strengths Our Students Bring: The Role of Social and Cultural Capital in Student Success

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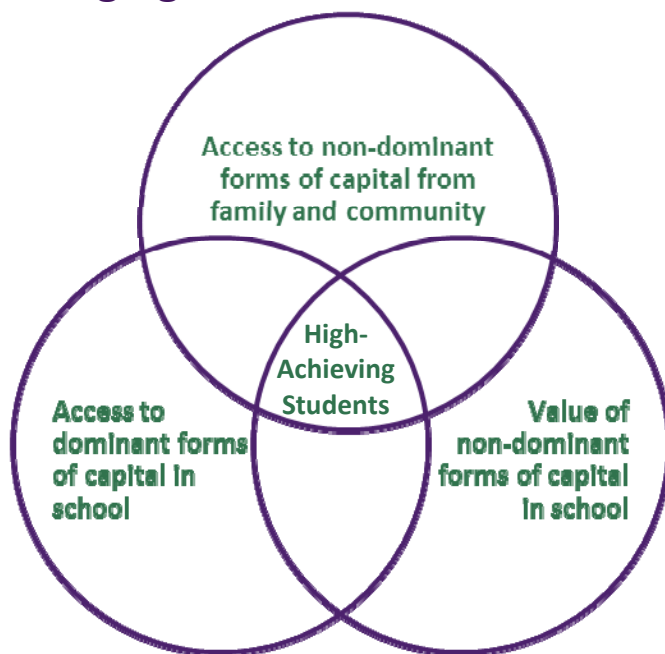
Overview: Based on interviews with 25 college-aspiring Latino/a high school juniors and seniors, this study examines students' narratives of their high school experiences and college preparation process. It identifies strengths within the students and their schools, families, and communities that supported their success as well as the barriers they had to overcome.

What is Resiliency Theory?

Resiliency theory is a way to understand an individual's ability to overcome adversity. It examines the protective factors, particularly an individual's strengths and assets, that help students to be successful despite significant challenges and vulnerabilities. It also includes a focus on the capacity of the individual's environment to provide access to health-enhancing resources in culturally-relevant ways.



Emerging Model of Student Success



The interviews revealed that students benefit from access to dominant forms of cultural and social capital through their schools. At the same time they also draw on non-dominant forms of capital from their families and communities. It is when these forms of capital are also included and valued at school that students are most successful.

What types of strengths and assets are important to consider?

Dominant Forms of Capital

- **Social Capital:** Social relationships and networks provide access to important economic, cultural and academic resources
- **Cultural Capital:** knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups

Non-Dominant Forms of Capital

- From Family, Community, Culture
- Characteristics (skills, knowledge, abilities) that foster resiliency and success
- Allow students to resist, and even transform, forms of discrimination and oppression

What forms of capital do students need to access in school?

Social Capital

High-achieving students benefit from resources they acquire from peers in advanced classes, individual relationships with teachers and counselors, connections with college admissions counselors and participation college preparation programs. Resources they gain from these relationships include:

- Assistance with coursework
- Positive academic identity
- Pro-academic and college-going norms
- College knowledge
- Support for college application process
- Motivation through individual caring

"...it was really nice to feel that somebody (referring to teacher) actually cared about what you are doing. And that makes you feel really happy and like you want to do good things so they approve...I want to go to college and he is like helping me, he is always like 'have you filled out your applications, scholarships and all this'... He's been a big motivation. I am really thankful."

Cultural Capital

Students learned the "rules of the game" and acquired skills to function within the dominant culture. These knowledge and skills include:

- English language skills
- Participation in extracurricular activities
- Individual motivation
- Desire for advancement
- Belief in self and ability
- Positive academic behavior and skill development
- Organizational and time management skills
- Leadership skills



What forms of capital do students bring from their homes and communities?

Family and Community Social Capital

Students were motivated by their **commitment to their family's and community's well-being**. They received support from their family, extended kin networks, and Latina peer groups.

"...I want to make this place where I'm living, my community, a better place for our next generation, because I see my little brother, and I see how bad the world it is right now, that's like, I don't want him to live that way, I don't want him to see what I'm seeing right now in high school, what I'm, what everything we're going through right now, so. That's what gets me up every day."

Intercultural Capital

Students demonstrate **skills in negotiating and adapting** to new and changing social, cultural, and economic environments. They are able to effectively **function in multiple cultures**.

"But I think it's also nice that I'm learning a new culture. Because then I'm not being so close-minded, I'm opening my mind to other things, to new things, but I don't think I can lose my culture, I think I will never lose my culture because my Mexican culture is deep in my heart."



Aspirational Capital

Students and their families maintained **high aspirations and hope for the future** despite facing very real challenges and barriers.

"I'm very excited for the DREAM Act, but in case it doesn't pass, I still know that I should give my best, because there are people who see that. There are people who put you down, but there are also people who help you and see that you really want to become a productive citizen."

Navigational Capital

The students **learned from their experiences of discrimination and racism** and shared this knowledge with others. They demonstrated **skill in navigating institutions** and structures of inequality.

"I remember I spelled out movies wrong, and then she (teacher) started laughing... From that moment I was like, no, I don't want anyone to, to make me feel inferior to them, so from then on I really studied."

Resistant Capital

Students possessed **knowledge and skills to challenge inequality**: including knowledge of structures of racism and desire to transform such structures.

"I want people to know the impact we can have is not just the hard labor we do, that we're immigrants, it's what we can do, that we can succeed in high school and college, that we can become big things..."



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Importance of “Exchange Value” of Capitals

In order to serve as an academic resource for students, schools must **incorporate the strengths** students acquire from their families and communities into everyday practice.

“...they accept that I come from another country and that I’m different, and that’s seen as a good thing, because I have like, another background, so I feel really comfortable with the IB program because it really allows, like Hispanics and other ethnicities to show who they are and like the learning they have.”



Implications

Short Term

- Ensure all students have access to dominant forms of capital.
- Learn about, recognize, and incorporate unique forms of cultural and social capital of students.
- Make “culture of power” explicit for students: Teach students to understand the value of cultural capital they possess as well as the realities of power present in society.
- Expose students to critical frameworks to understand the challenges they face, particularly those related to racial, political, and socio-economic discrimination.
- Incorporate students’ strengths and assets in college recruitment strategies, particularly family and community social capital.
- Provide access to dominant forms of capital in culturally-relevant ways through college preparation and recruitment programs.

Long Term

- Shift from a deficit approach to assets-based approach to research and educational practice—attention to identifying assets of Communities of Color.
- Change structures of privilege and power to value non-dominant forms of capital.

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For additional information on the findings of this research, please contact:

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