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To cite this article: Marissa C. Vasquez , Ángel de Jesus Gonzalez , Yolanda Cataño & Fernando Garcia (2021): Exploring the Role of Women as Validating Agents for Latino Men in Their Transfer Success, Community College Journal of Research and Practice

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1873874>



Published online: 01 Feb 2021.



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Exploring the Role of Women as Validating Agents for Latino Men in Their Transfer Success

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the ways women served as validating agents for Latino men who had transferred from a community college to a four-year institution. Informed by Rendón's theory of validation, participants expressed numerous ways in which women figures (e.g., mothers, sisters, significant others) were sources of validation across their pre and post transfer experience. Findings yielded the need for increased involvement of women in men of color initiatives, compensation for emotional labor performed by women, and engagement opportunities for women family members. The authors provide recommendations for research and practice.

In 2016, the Huffington Post published an article titled, *What's the Place of Women in the Boys and Men of Color Conversation?* Eboni Zamani-Gallaher and J. Luke Wood, coauthors of the piece, offered their own response to the title's question, exclaiming, "UNAPOLOGETICALLY FRONT AND CENTER" (para. 8). Zamani-Gallaher and Wood remind us that women (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc.) have played critical roles in the lives of boys and men of color, particularly in raising them. Latino¹ men² have often acknowledged their mothers as validating agents and bearers of wisdom, imparting words of affirmation and emotional encouragement (Rodriguez et al., 2019). In addition to their mothers, Latino men have also credited women within their immediate and extended families, such as grandmothers, aunts, and significant others, for their guidance and support (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Sáenz, Garcia-Louis, De Las Mercedes, et al., 2018). As an homage to their *familia*'s (family) hard work and sacrifices, Latino men often express a sense of responsibility to excel academically (Ojeda et al., 2011; Pérez, 2014; Pérez & Taylor, 2016).

As we consider the literature on the trajectory of Latino men in higher education, scholars have noted two common themes. The first is that family plays a crucial role in sustaining Latino men's academic resilience and persistence. The second is that Latino men often begin their postsecondary education in community college. These two outcomes prompted us to consider more specifically: (1) the role of women in the lives of Latino men; and, (2) the community college-to-four-year university trajectory of Latino men. Thus, we center this paper on the reflections of Latino men who have successfully transferred from a community college to a four-year institution, drawing attention to the ways that women served as validating agents along their trajectory.

The community college role in advancing Latino Men's academic career

Over the last decade, there has been a steady increase of research on Latino men in the community college. Such literature has focused on four primary areas, including: (1) non-cognitive outcomes, such as degree utility, intrinsic interest, sense of belonging (García & Garza, 2016; Guaracha, 2014; Palacios

et al., 2015; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2015); (2) masculinities (Harper & Harris, 2010; Sáenz et al., 2013, 2015); (3) faculty-student engagement (Bauer, 2014); and, (4) graduation rates and enrollment trends (Hatch et al., 2016; Vasquez Urias, 2012). Regarding the latter, data indicate that one in every five degree-seeking, community college student is Latino/a (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Yet, while scholars have noted that community colleges serve as the primary pathway for Latina/o students into postsecondary education, completion rates fail to mirror such enrollment (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Adelman, 2005; Chávez, 2008; Kurlaender, 2006). In fact, only 15.4% of Latino men will earn a certificate, degree, or transfer from a community college to a four-year institution within three years (Wood et al., 2014).

While these data are cause for concern, community colleges do play a significant role in providing Latina/o students an avenue for earning a bachelor's degree (Nuñez & Elizondo, 2013). Cataldi et al. (2011) found that nearly 35% of Latinas/os who earned a baccalaureate degree were once transfer students from public, two-year colleges. Given that community colleges serve as an access point into baccalaureate degree attainment for Latino men, it is critical that we gain further understanding of their collegiate experiences. While the literature on Latino men in community colleges provide insights into their academic experiences, only few have looked at the role of validating agents (Bauer, 2014; Palacios, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2016) along their educational trajectories. Only recently has the role of women in Latino men's community college success been a focus of conversation. Extant literature has found that women family members were crucial in supporting the educational goals of Latino men, which manifested through various forms of cultural capital (Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, et al., 2018). Yet, there is still a gap in research on how women impact, inform, and influence Latino men's student success. Given these gaps in the literature, this study sought to explore the role of women in the undergraduate experiences of Latino men.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it broadly sought to understand the lived experiences of Latino men and their academic journey from a two-year college to a four-year institution. Within this context, we explored the ways in which Latino men centered women who provided validation in their narrative. As scholar-practitioners, we are committed to advancing equity and inclusion for Latino men via our scholarship and praxis. This study sought to do so by gaining insight about the transitional experiences of Latino men (of which there is a scarcity in published literature), and by elevating the efforts of women who have served as validating agents through sources of motivation, support, and strength. We also hope to acknowledge cultural and emotional displays of support not typically recognized by mainstream academia.

Our inquiry was guided by the following questions: (1) how do Latino men make meaning of their academic and social transitions from a community college to a four-year institution, and (2) what role did women play (if any) in their academic success? The following sections offer a review of the literature, describes the theoretical framework, outlines the research design and methodology, and concludes with findings and recommendations.

Literature review

Given this study's intersecting focus on transfer and roles that women play in the lives of Latino men, we explored literature that reflected these themes. Specifically, we focused on the impact of *familismo* (family) on Latina/o student outcomes and the unique ways that women have influenced the success of Latino men. Finally, we review a few pieces on the transfer experiences of Latino men.

The role of Familismo on Latina/o/x student success

The multifaceted identities of Latina/o/x's in the U.S. have been studied by scholars across various disciplines, including education, sociology, ethnic studies, Chicana/Latina studies, etc. Such research has consistently noted the collectivistic and familial values (*familismo*) that have contributed to the success of Latinas/os/xs (Gonzales, 2019; Marín & Marín, 1991; Palomin, 2020). The concept of *familismo* is defined as a cultural norm that involves a keen attachment to one's immediate and extended family, which is typically expressed by actions that reflect loyalty, responsibility, cohesion, and sacrifice (to name a few) (Gonzales, 2019; Jabbar et al., 2019; Marín & Marín, 1991; Palomin, 2020). Yosso (2005) asserted that familial principles serve as assets for Latina/o students navigating the educational system. In fact, research has found that Latina/o students leverage familial capital in-and-out of institutions of higher education as forms of resilience and persistence (Ballysingh, 2016; Jabbar et al., 2019; Ojeda et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2006).

Among Latino men, scholars have noted that family, including parents, siblings, and other relatives, serve as a source of motivation for students as they navigate college. In particular, Latino men are likely to cite the importance of making their family proud as symbolic markers of their persistence and success (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). As noted by Acevedo-Gil and Zerquera (2016), Latino men exert *ganas*, a student's motivation to excel academically, to "honor parents' struggles and sacrifices" (p. 3) and support the upward mobility of their family (Cerezo et al., 2013). Maintaining connections with family has also been noted as a means to combat social isolation and is critical for increasing students' sense of mattering at their institutions (Ballysingh, 2016; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Pérez, 2017). Yet, some scholars have noted the complexity of *familismo*, particularly among Latino men who have been socialized to adhere to expected gender roles (Sáenz, García-Louis, De Las Mercedes, et al., 2018). Such roles include not asking for help, serving as a financial provider, restricting emotionality so as to not appear weak, exerting physical toughness, and maintaining cohesion within the family (Harris, 2010; Mirandé, 1997; Palomin, 2020; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). While such demands produce internal and external pressure, research continues to underscore that familial capital (Yosso, 2005) remains a source of motivation for Latino men as they navigate higher education (Pérez & Taylor, 2016; Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, et al., 2018).

In fact, the work of Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, et al. (2018) illuminated the reality that Latino men in community college "relied heavily on *familismo* and familial capital as a source of support as they matriculated and navigated through the community college" (p. 9). In fact, Latino men often acknowledged family as a means of support when experiencing academic and personal obstacles while in college. Families were found to support the coping process of Latino men by providing unwavering support and solidarity as they traversed the community college and transfer experience (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Vasquez et al., 2020). This body of work supports the fact that family and familial capital play an integral role in the experiences of Latino men who are navigating multiple avenues of the college experience including ivy leagues, community colleges, and four-year institutions.

Role of Latina mothers and family members

Researchers have also delved into the importance of Latina mothers and family members on the educational success of Latino men (Zell, 2010). The role of women family members continues to emerge as a critical asset in the success of Latino men in college, particularly as forms of capital, such as aspirational, familial, and navigational capital (Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, et al., 2018). Latina mothers are of particular importance, as their messages of encouragement play a critical role in Latino men's academic persistence and their college aspirations (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Ceja, 2004). Further, it has been noted that mothers often "encourage relational, sensitive, and well-rounded masculinities" (Harris, 2010, p. 307). Scholars have noted the ways that community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) underpin Latino men's motivation and aspirations to continue their education with a focus on how *familismo* influences and supports their persistence (Ojeda

et al., 2011; Pérez, 2017; Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, et al., 2018). These various forms of capital are essential to ensure Latino men's academic determination, with notions of collective responsibility and commitment to help others while also maintaining family bonds (Pérez, 2017). Such responsibility also includes opportunities for academic institutions to foster relationships with families of Latina/o/x students to ensure successful transfer and graduation.

Latina/o/x transfer experiences

Several scholars have documented the transfer experiences of Latina/o/x students. Such research has highlighted both the pre and post transfer of Latina/o/x students, underscoring key elements that have either contributed to or hindered their success. Regarding pre-transfer, scholars have noted individual, institutional, and environmental factors that have facilitated various outcomes for Latina/o/x students. Suarez (2011) found that students relied on an "internal drive to succeed" (p. 107), which was motivated by personal experiences and a commitment to transfer. Solis and Durán (2020) refer to this as having a "transfer mentality" (p. 6) in which Latinx students expressed a determination to transfer regardless of personal and institutional barriers. Such barriers include not having had strong academic preparation in high school (Suarez, 2011), not having access to individuals knowledgeable of transfer requirements (i.e., transfer agents; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009), or being distracted by peers, employment, or significant others (Solis & Durán, 2020).

However, once students had set clear academic goals (Suarez, 2011) and had adopted a transfer mentality, they became focused on maintaining their academic progress. This was further supported by institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011) such as faculty, staff, and program directors, who validated Latina/o/x students, both in and out of the classroom (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Suarez, 2011). Broader institutional efforts to support transfer include adopting a transfer sending culture (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004), which involves an institutional commitment by community colleges to prioritize the transfer function for students seeking this route. Further, four-year institutions must adopt a transfer receptive culture (Jain et al., 2011) in which transfer students are supported throughout their academic, personal, social, and financial transitions. These support systems are critical, given that many Latina/o/x transfer students are underrepresented at four-year universities, despite their intent to transfer (Nuñez & Elizondo, 2013).

Without strong support systems and access to navigational and social capital, community college students often experience transfer shock (Hills, 1965) upon arriving at the four-year university. Among Latinx students, Solis and Durán (2020) noted that such shock manifested as "transfer tax" (p. 6) in which students experienced an emotional taxation from adjusting to a new academic and social environment. Such adjustments included shifting from longer semester systems to fast-paced quarter systems; understanding articulation of prerequisite courses; access to transfer student housing; knowing how to access university resources; adjusting to increased costs of attendance and text books; experiencing social isolation from peers, particularly those who began as freshman and had already established social networks; and learning how to engage with faculty when enrolled in large lecture courses. Participants also noted that being a transfer student meant having less time to participate in high impact practices such as research, internships, fellowships, and professional networking opportunities.

Given these multiple obstacles, transfer students often feel overwhelmed, frustrated, alone, and internalize feelings associated with imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). While Latina/o/x transfer students may experience similar barriers as their peers, their transition and pathways are interjected with feelings of isolation, inferiority, and discrimination (Solis & Durán, 2020). Thus, institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011) play a critical role in supporting Latina/o/x transfer students, both at the community college and four-year institution. Cortez and Castro (2017) underscored this need for Mexican and Mexican American transfer students, citing the importance of having caring, supportive, and well-informed faculty, academic and financial aid advisors, program directors, and college administrators on students' community college to four-

year trajectories. Thus, the need for continued guidance, fem/mentorship, affinity groups, transition programs, faculty representation, and affirming spaces is especially critical for supporting and maintaining Latina/o/x transfer students' mental health, sense of belonging, and academic success.

Transfer experiences of Latino men

While scholars have documented the experiences of Latina/o/x transfer students (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Solis & Durán, 2020; Suarez, 2011), very few studies have focused solely on Latino men. In fact, only a handful of published articles have done so in recent years. With a focus on California, Texas, and Florida, Rodriguez et al. (2017) explored the transfer experiences of 36 undergraduate Latino men. In particular, they sought to understand how prior gender socialization (e.g., masculinities, cultural expectations) played a role in their transition from the community college to a four-year university. Participants held normative perceptions of what it meant to be a man (e.g., physical, behavioral traits), which had been internalized via interactions with family, friends, media, and cultural norms. Such socialization influenced their concept of self, the coming out process, help-seeking behaviors, interactions with peers, major selection, and motivations to succeed (Rodriguez et al., *in press*).

Using Salinas (2015, 2017) crossover capital framework, Vasquez et al. (2020) further conceptualized the transfer experiences of Latino men. According to Salinas (2015, 2017), crossover capital refers to the process by which Latino/a/x students negotiate their sociocultural identities as they interact with varying communities of people and settings. During this process, students gain and transfer capital across visible and invisible spaces. With this framework in mind, Vasquez et al. (2020) found that as Latino men transferred from the community college to a four-year institution, they experienced a crossing of intellectual (i.e., the high school-to-community college transition, and the community college-to-university transition), emotional (e.g., gaining confidence, resiliency, upholding gendered and cultural expectations), and geographical borders (e.g., leaving home upon transferring). During these transitions, Latino men found themselves navigating “an incongruence of cultural realities as they entered unfamiliar academic contexts” (p. 93), in which they leveraged guidance and support from family members and significant others, thus relying on prior forms of capital in new spaces.

Theoretical framework

Scholars have long upheld Rendón's (1994) validation theory as a pedagogical framework to underscore the significance of fostering meaningful relationships between Latina/o/x students and educators (Linares & Muñoz, 2011). With this in mind, the authors analyzed participants' narratives through the lens of validation. Rendón defined validation as occurring both in-class and out-of-class, often relying on both academic and interpersonal dynamics. She refers to in-class validation as the contributions of faculty and the importance of creating safe classroom spaces that lead to academic validation for minoritized students and women. Out-of-class validation includes other members of the institution (faculty, staff, administrators, counselors, and coaches) and the community (friends and family) who also foster students' academic and interpersonal development (p. 16).

Given that academic structures continue to be Euro-centric and traditionally favor dominant student identities (e.g., White, male, heterosexual, 18–22 years old), scholars have confirmed that validation supports the inclusion of racially minoritized students (i.e., Latino men) and women to ensure student learning and success (Allen, 2016; Cabrera & Hurtado, 2015). Validation is especially critical for Latina/o/x transfer students, who encounter varying academic contexts (two-year and four-year institutions) where they must negotiate and renegotiate their sociocultural identities (e.g., intellectually, emotionally, socially, geographically; Vasquez et al., 2020). Thus, drawing on validation theory, we underpin this study on Latino men's transfer success and the ways in which women serve as validating agents along their educational trajectory.

Research design and methodology

Using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), this study sought to understand the lived experiences of undergraduate Latino men who successfully transferred from a community college to a four-year institution. This inquiry was part of a larger research project that explored: (a) college transitions among Latino men; (b) the socialization of masculinities; (c) the role of social identities in college; and, (d) the role of women in Latino men's academic journey. Protocol themes included topics such as pre and post community college transfer experiences (e.g., "What was it like transitioning academically to the four-year university?"), masculine identity development (e.g., "How did you come about developing this understanding of what it means to be a man?"), the intersections of race and gender in college, (e.g., "How do you believe that your gender or race/ethnicity has influenced your experience in higher education?"), and the role of women in Latino men's identity development and academic success (e.g., "As a recent transfer student, how have the women in your life supported your transition?"). The latter is the primary focus of this paper.

Phenomenology underscores the essence and meaning-making of each participants' lived experiences, while eliciting the commonality of experiences among participants. As researchers, we began with the *epoché* process of phenomenology, in which we engaged each interview with a clear mind-set, being mindful of the potential impact of our assumptions. We arrived to the research site an hour in advance of each scheduled interview to review the protocol and reflect on potential biases. This reflection practice occurred throughout the data collection process and during our analysis.

Site and participant selection

Recruitment for the study occurred in the fall of 2017 at a large, public, four-year institution located in California. A designated Hispanic-Serving Institution, the campus' enrollment includes 29% Hispanic/Latino, 35% White, 7.3% Asian, 6.3% multiethnicities, 5.6% Filipino, 4% African American, and .3% Native American students. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who met the scope of the study. This approach allowed us to intentionally recruit participants who had first-hand experience of the phenomenon. An IRB-approved recruitment e-mail was sent by the institution's registrar office on behalf of the researchers to all new, incoming transfer students ($N = 3,090$). To be eligible for the study, participants must have self-identified with the following criteria: (a) were over the age of 18, (b) identified as Latino or Hispanic, (c) identified as men, (d) had previously transferred from a community college to a four-year institution, and (e) were enrolled as an undergraduate student. Interested students were asked to contact the researcher directly to ensure voluntary participation.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, each ranging between 60–120 minutes. Individual interviews allowed the researchers to delve deeply into the participant's academic and personal experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Interviews took place in the first author's office. Participants were asked to carefully review and sign the informed consent form prior to the interview. Once collected, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym and complete a pre-interview demographic form that included questions regarding their current institution (e.g., major/minor, enrollment status), their community college institution (e.g., years enrolled prior to transferring, degree or certificate earned), personal/identifying information (e.g., languages spoken, ethnic identity), familial context (e.g., parental level of education, first generation status), financial background (e.g., annual income, financial aid), and long-term aspirations (e.g., professional and academic). At the conclusion of the interview, participants received a 20 USD gift card as an incentive for their time.

Participants

A total of 27 Latino men participated in the study. The majority of students identified as solely Mexican ($n = 23$, 85%), were between the ages of 20–24 ($n = 16$, 59%), were enrolled full-time ($n = 25$, 93%), and were the first in their immediate family to attend college ($n = 17$, 63%). All participants identified as straight, cis-gendered men ($n = 27$, 100%). The majority also had one or more parents who was born outside of the U.S. ($n = 24$, 89%), while only two participants themselves were born outside of the country.

Twenty-three (85%) participants reported receiving some form of financial aid (e.g., grants, state or federal loans, Montgomery GI Bill), and the majority ($n = 22$, 81%) were employed. Majors varied across various disciplines, such as humanities (e.g., communications, journalism), social science (e.g., sociology, political science), applied science (e.g., marketing, civil engineering), natural science (e.g., biochemistry), and formal science (e.g., mathematics). On average, it took participants four years to transfer to a four-year institution, and were enrolled in an average of three community colleges prior to doing so. See the Appendix A for additional demographic information.

Data analysis procedures

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed via the online transcription service *Temi*. Once completed, transcripts were uploaded to *Dedoose* – an online qualitative data analysis program that enables multiple researchers to work collaboratively on analyzing a dataset. Following a phenomenological analytical process, we began by identifying salient phrases that captured participants' meaning-making about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This bracketing process was coupled with *horizontalization*, in which we compared illuminating quotes across participant narratives to ensure consistency. The third phase captured the interpretation of meanings by clustering significant phrases and quotations (i.e., constant comparative methods). The clustering of meanings then facilitated initial themes to emerge. These themes were then organized into textual descriptions (e.g., statements that described participant experiences) and structural descriptions (e.g., statements that described the settings or context in which participants experienced the phenomenon; Creswell, 2013, p. 82). For example, textual descriptions were applied when Latino men reflected on how women served as sources of validation. Meanwhile, structural descriptions were applied when participants spoke about their unique experiences within their two-year college and four-year university. Finally, we identified overarching themes that commonly applied to the experiences of the participants. These findings are highlighted in later sections.

Trustworthiness

As previously noted, the researchers engaged in on-going processes of reflection (e.g., *epoche*), during both data collection and analysis. We used bracketing and memo writing as methods to capture preconceived notions and potential biases. We met consistently to discuss our interpretations of the data, emerging findings, possible themes, and implications. As scholars, we also considered our positionalities with respect to the participant's narratives and identities. Data were collected and analyzed by several research team members; whose identities varied: cis-gendered, hetero women; a cis-gendered hetero man; queer Latinx; African American, Desi American; Hmong American; Latina/Mexicana. The graduate researchers were community college transfer students themselves during their undergraduate tenure and most were first-generation college students. Finally, while most of the team had worked at a community college, all had a professional background in higher education student affairs. Given our diverse experiences, we were able to approach this research from varying perspectives, which added to the richness of our study. We also considered the ways that our privileged and marginalized identities informed our rapport with participants, interpretation of data, and contextualization of findings.

Findings

Informed by Rendón's (1994) validation theory, we framed our analysis around the ways that women have acted as validating agents for the Latino men in this study. Findings revealed that women played instrumental roles in their transfer success. Four primary themes emerged from our analysis, including: (1) *La motivación* (motivation), (2) *El Apoyo* (support), (3) *La Responsabilidad* (accountability), and (4) *Las Inspiraciones* (inspirations). Participants shared how women family members, women who were professionals, and other women who they had a relationship with were critical in achieving their educational goals.

"I can always count on her for anything": Motivación from mothers at home

Mothers emerged as primary sources of support and motivation. In contrast to dominant forms of college support (e.g., tutoring, financial assistance), our participants cited emotional and moral encouragement that their *madres* afforded them during difficult times. One participant, Nick, articulated the way that his mother contributed to his success in transferring:

The primary motivator for that [transferring] would be my mother. I feel like it was me using her as a motivator, like I need to provide for my family . . . It might've been difficult to connect with me, but I use her as a primary motivator just because I've seen all the stuff she's been through and the way we grew up.

Similarly, Vincent, shared how his mother's unconditional love and support was influential in his trajectory, stating, "I view my mom today as a really positive influence. Because she's actually one of the few people I know who actually . . . like I can 100% say my mom will always offer support. Will always love me." Participants shared that the words and actions of their mothers instilled an internal drive to succeed. According to Linares and Muñoz (2011), these acts of validation influence students' sense of confidence.

Participants used terms such as "selfless," "hard-working," and "loving" to describe the women in their family. Matthew, for example, reflected on his mother's persistence despite personal and familial obstacles:

Yeah, she's always been like my stronger woman influence, just because she's always been there, especially recently when she got separated. She had to work for the first time in like 12 years of being married. Seeing her struggle is what motivates me to continue.

These reflections evoked a determination to graduate from college. Such drive was typically an expression of gratitude and respect toward their mothers, particularly for enduring trauma while still providing for their family.

Similar sentiments were expressed by participants regarding the way mothers contributed to their persistence by offering words of validation and role modeling behaviors that they hoped to emulate. One participant, Sergio, provided insight on this, sharing that his mom:

Was always there for me no matter what. If I told her to come out to my sporting events, she would come out. If I told her that I wanted her to come to a meeting with me, she would be there. I can always count on her for anything. She would always make time for me.

The sentiments shared by participants about their mothers carried a deeper meaning. For these Latino men, their mothers were not only a driving source of motivation, but reflected admiration, love, and appreciation. In addition to mothers, other women validating agents also offered support toward transfer for Latino men.

"I just felt more comfortable getting it from outside than going in with those counselors": Apoyo from Mujeres Beyond the Institution

Participants reflected on the emotional validation and encouragement from various women in their lives, including cousins, grandmothers, and significant others. Regarding the latter, participants often

shared that their girlfriends encouraged them to stay focused, while their men peers were often a distraction. Like many other participants, Joey attributed his girlfriend to be someone who provided academic guidance for him:

My girlfriend, like I said, she's been a great support, a great guidance since I met her. I think that's one of the reasons that we started dating, because I knew I needed that guidance. I don't know. I just felt more comfortable getting it from outside than going in with those counselors, especially from someone that had already transferred and had done it herself. I didn't really feel a good vibe from them. She really didn't get much help from counselors either. I mean, she's been a really, really strong support.

Participants' girlfriends were often cited as being "experts" in navigating academic spaces, both at the two-year and four-year institution. This was typically a result of these women being more advanced in their academic career (e.g., coursework, transfer, graduation) than their partners.

In addition to significant others, participants also identified cousins as additional sources of validation. Ricardo shared the following about his cousin, "she's been like a mentor. She's taught me how to write, like her essays that she writes, also the admission essays. She showed me a lot of useful information about how the process works." This quote demonstrates the ways that social and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) contributed to his academic preparation. Participants often received support from women who served as pseudo-counselors that were critical to their academic development.

Familial capital was also conveyed via other maternal women at home. When asked about sources of support, Gabriel shared,

It would definitely be my mom and my grandma. Like I said, they've always been there for me financially. They've always been there to give me advice on whatever I need and they're very strong, independent women that I really admire.

For participants like Gabriel, support was often a combination of emotional guidance, financial assistance, and hot meals. Given the collectivistic nature of Latino culture, participants also noted other family members who supported their academic journey, including *Tías* (aunts). For example, Brandon spoke of the role that his aunt played for him and his siblings when their mother was occupied at work:

... when my mom was working, she [aunt] would pick us up after school, she would make us food, like a whole bunch of stuff. I would consider them [aunts] all as kind of like moms. I know I have my biological mom, but I also see the rest of them as moms even though they're my aunts just because of all the care they had for us.

In all, the notion of "support" was manifested through validating acts of care, advice, time, and direction. Latino men sought holistic support from women beyond the institution, even academic guidance.

"She knew I had the potential": women who foster *responsabilidad*

Another theme that was prominent among participants, was the way in which women kept students accountable toward their goals. David reflected on the consistent messaging from his mother, reminding him, "to do the best that I can. She did the same for my sisters, but I guess it was more with me, because she knew I had the potential." Another participant, Hector, shared how his mother has continuously checked in on his academic progress:

"she would ask me about school, she would ask me about my grades, about what I'm doing next, if I'm applying to college and when, how that's going, if I've been accepted. She's always been a part of it, so she's supported me a lot."

Like Hector, other participants cited mothers, sisters, and cousins as being instrumental to their community college and transfer experiences. The verbal nudges, reminders about deadlines, validation of effort, and informal check-ins demonstrated an authentic sense of care. Participants internalized "care" as a sense of responsibility and accountability toward their academic goals.

Participants' significant others played similar roles of accountability that encouraged students to rethink their educational trajectory and transfer process. After taking a year off from his studies, Ethan explained that his girlfriend was central in helping him prepare to transfer. He shared:

When I took that whole year off because I didn't know what to do, that's when we started talking more and she was already going through her last year there to transfer out. And just seeing her be able to do it when we started the same year — because I met her the first semester I was there and we took the first class together — and seeing she was almost done and again, I'm still at the beginning kind of influenced me to start going and she just ended up helping me out more.

Another participant, Alex, also expressed gratitude for his girlfriend in helping him navigate the transfer process, stating, “she's still helping me with the school stuff and choosing classes and all this and all that. Just supporting.” Ray too was one of several participants who had much to share regarding how his girlfriend was a major source of encouragement in the transfer process:

She's also very focused on school . . . so having someone like that alongside me, who's also very focused on school, was a really big support, because sometimes it can be difficult when you have friends that aren't as focused on school, and they want to do things, like they want to hang out and do things. I've always had to be the one that says no, because I have homework to do or something to study for, or have work to go to, and so having someone like that has been really . . . Like another good sense of strong support, to have someone who has the same goals as me, to graduate.

In addition to their partners, participants also expressed how other women, such as mentors, professors, coaches, and counselors motivated them to remain focused on their studies. For example, Jesse reflected on a community college professor who held him accountable by constantly reminding him of what he had to get done. He shared that,

. . . She was always stressing about don't waste time while you're here. I guess that was the main message and all. I've heard a lot of teachers say that and it's really simple, but she said it and I heard it.

Despite having heard encouraging messages before, the personal connection Jesse (and others like him) had made with his professor, allowed for a more meaningful awareness of accountability. Erick, a student formerly in foster care, echoed this sentiment about his counselor:

I have so much love for her. I owe a lot of this to her. She was really nurturing. I can cry in front of her and I would be okay with it. She was really loving too. Every time I would talk to her, I felt like she really cared. She really wanted to help me. To me, that's something really important.

Erick went on to express that the “motherly” attention his counselor gave him, held him accountable to not only complete his community college coursework, but also to transfer and graduate with his baccalaureate degree.

“I Used Her as a Primary Motivator”: *Mujeres* who served as *inspiraciones*

The last theme to emerge from our analysis was the way that women inspired participants to persist toward degree completion. While sisters had previously been referenced as role models, some men had younger siblings, specifically younger sisters, who served as inspiration for their transfer goals. Participants expressed wanting to be role models for their sisters and ensure that they too followed a path toward higher education. Education was not an individualized experience. In fact, every participant noted that their desire to earn a degree was for both personal and familial mobility. Roger shared:

I want to get my two little sisters and possibly myself, if I can get there, to just graduate from University and change that image for my family. I think in the community I grew up in we had role models, but a lot of them had to do with having technical jobs, that sort of thing and the only people we saw that were role models that had degrees were our teachers in school. Other than that, we didn't have role models within our community that had degrees, PhDs, or something like that.

Nick also admitted that his younger sister inspired and motivated him to excel in school, claiming, “She’s the one who’s really into her education. When I started thinking about it as well, I used her as a primary motivator, like, I do need to be a role model.” Additionally, participants believed that a college degree would afford financial security for their loved ones. Fernando called it, “feeling protected.”

Discussion

Our findings underscore the significance of validation from women in the lives of Latino men. More explicitly, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and significant others contributed greatly to participants’ persistence toward their transfer goals, through various expressions of validation. Rather than relying on academic strategies that often fail to take students’ cultural identities into consideration, participants received *consejos* and *motivacion* from their inner circle of women (Sáenz, Garcia-Louis, De Las Mercedes, et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005; Zarate, 2007). Mothers emerged as strong influencers in participants’ experiences, which aligns with prior research (Ceja, 2004) that expresses how mothers serve as a determining factor for academic success. Participants like Nick, Vincent, Matthew, and Sergio clearly articulated how their mothers were a pillar of motivation and provided advice as they navigated their transfer journey. Mothers were out-of-class validating agents that aided our participants in their transfer process. The concept of *familismo* acknowledges the collectivist bond within immediate and extended families within Latino culture, something that was made evident through our participant responses.

Participants also noted the difficulty of getting on track to achieve their educational goals, something that Shaw and Chin-Newman (2017) attribute to the stressors associated with learning new processes, new environments, and societal, academic, and familial expectations. Beyond the motivation and advice women provided our participants, they also offered support to reach their goals. Out-of-class validation through support and accountability from girlfriends were a prominent experience for Joey, Ricardo, Gabriel, Vincent, and Brandon. They expressed how women’s validating acts of service (e.g., helping them navigate transfer requirements), supported their progress and pathway toward transfer. Considering this, institutions must do better in developing programs that are relevant to the needs of Latino men in the transfer process, rather than allowing the burden to fall on peers.

Other women that were acknowledged as validating agents were sisters. Participants like Roger and Nick knew that they were role models for their siblings and were determined to not only transfer, but complete their bachelor’s degree. This is critical, given that validation has been found to engender students to “view themselves as competent college students” (Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 25) and complete their educational aspirations. The women in the lives of the participants all played influential roles that are critical toward transfer success for Latino men. Acting as out-of-class validating agents, participants’ girlfriends provided navigational awareness of educational spaces; bonds with grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts played a significant role in advising, motivation and supporting these men in their transfer process (Vazquez, 2015).

Women beyond the institution were foundational in our participants’ understanding of self and their abilities to perform in the academic setting. Given that Latino men are often socialized to moderate help-seeking behaviors, our findings suggest that they may feel less threatened by acts and words of validation from women they trust. However, institutions should not assume that all Latino men have out-of-class validating agents and should reflect on how to best support Latino men pre- and post-transfer.

Implications for future research

There were nuanced differences in our findings around the role that women played for the participants. Specifically, familial women provided advice, motivation, and support, while partners, girlfriends, and institutional women leaders provided accountability to the participants along their

journeys. Future research should explore how varied relationship types provide various forms of capital for Latino men in their pre- and post-transfer experience. A deeper understanding of the emotional, social, and academic support could help practitioners better serve these students as they transition from community college to four-year institutions.

Beyond the role that women played in the transfer success for our participants, another salient finding not centered in this paper was the catalyst role that women played in supporting Latino men's masculinity identity development. Future research should explore how women provide emotional and intellectual labor to help deconstruct toxic masculinities for Latino men. Extant literature generally underscores the significance of men of color helping men of color; however, additional research should acknowledge the heavy role women play in disrupting notions of what it means to be a man and the ways grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts, and other women teach young men healthy masculinity ideas and practices. With this in mind, future research should also examine the ways in which Latino men reflect on and understand their various intersecting identities (e.g., LGBTQ+, undocumented, differently abled) as it pertains to their educational trajectory. In addition, while this manuscript focused on the role of women, further scholarship is needed on the transfer experience of Latino men as a whole.

Implications for practice

Being that women played a role in the transfer process of Latino men, community college professionals (administrators, staff, and faculty) should consider engagement opportunities that take a collective approach to transfer activities, created through *familismo* values that help validate students' skills, knowledge, belonging, and readiness to transfer. The participants constantly highlighted the way women played crucial roles through direct and indirect validation (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rendón, 1994). One example to maximize this finding would be to have men of color initiatives reconsider the role women can play in supporting this work while being mindful of the emotional labor that women exert in helping men of color develop consciousness of their privileged identity. In other words, institutions should consider how others on campus (i.e., non-women and non-women of color faculty, staff, administrators) can facilitate validating actions, behaviors, and messaging. For example, institutions can develop and implement a validating toolkit that leaders can use to shift language, curriculum, and practices toward an asset-based lens. This may be especially helpful for counselors and faculty who lead transfer-level or transfer preparation courses (e.g., courses aligned with AB 705³) and services. Programs that often support Latino men such as PUENTE, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), TRiO (Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services), Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) programming, and others can also capitalize on these professional development opportunities to validate students' personal, academic, and long-term growth. In California, the Student Equity Policy (SEP)⁴ could be leveraged to fund these institutional capacity efforts for men of color (Felix & Gonzalez, 2020; Felix & Ramirez, 2020).

Another suggestion would be for institutions (both two-year and four-year) to coordinate and host an appreciation or recognition event where students can express gratitude to women (including mothers, mother figures, siblings, significant others) for the impact they have had in their educational trajectories. Instructors and counselors may also ask students to write letters to validating agents they have encountered throughout their educational trajectory, including family and chosen family members, to express gratitude. Institutions can utilize these narratives as a source of data to inform additional opportunities for practices that Latino men perceive as positive validation (actions, characteristics, attributes). As suggested by our findings, fostering a transfer sending and receptive culture (Jain et al., 2011) through acts and messages of validation can further support the success of Latino men.

Conclusion

This study positions women as key influencers and contributors to Latino men transfer success. As both community colleges and transfer institutions develop programs and services for transferring Latino men, there must be an understanding of which validating agents are being included or excluded in these developments. Women, especially grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts, and girlfriends were all pillars in the success for these 27 participants. As we reflect on Zamani-Gallaher and Wood (2016) article, we are reminded that women too deserve recognition for the role they play in the efforts to support men of color. The work of women must be “unapologetically front and center” (Zamani-Gallaher and Wood, 2016, pa. 8) in order to understand the full comprehensive experience of Latino men across the educational pipeline. Our results mirror this call to action and center the role women have played in the transfer experience of Latino men.

Notes

1. When referring to participants in the study, we intentionally use the term Latino (rather than Latinx) given that all participants identified as cis-gendered, hetero Latino men. We also maintain the original language of extant literature when necessary (e.g., Latina/o, Latinx). When *not* referring to participants or extant literature, we also use Latina/o/x to be inclusive of gender identities beyond the binary of men (Latino) and women (Latina).
2. We use the terms men and women (rather than male and female) to acknowledge the fluidity of the gender spectrum in contrast to traditional binary roles.
3. California’s AB 705 requires community college districts to maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one-year timeframe. See California Community College Chancellor’s Office, <https://assessment.cccco.edu/ab-705-implementation>.
4. The Student Equity Policy (SEP) is a California state policy that funds targeted efforts to mitigate equity gaps in that targets eight racial/ethnic groups, women, LGBTQ+ students, homeless students, students with disabilities, low-income students, foster youth, and veterans (Student equity plans, \$78220, 2014).

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Appendix A

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Age	Ethnicity	Major	Number of CC's prior to transfer	Enrollment Status	First Gen College Student	Receiving Financial Aid	Long-term Degree Aspirations
Roger	33	Mexican	Criminal Justice	1	PT	No	Yes	BA
Justin	22	Mexican	Marketing	1	FT	No	Yes	MA
Nick	23	Mexican	Psychology	2	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Ricardo	23	Salvadoran	Journalism	1	FT	Yes	Yes	MA
David	25	Mexican	Psychology	2	FT	Yes	Yes	BA
Carlos	32	Mexican	Psychology	3	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Julian	39	Mexican	Accounting	1	PT	No	No	MA/JD
Ray	22	Mexican/ Colombian	Mechanical Engineering	3	FT	No	Yes	MA
Gabriel	22	Mexican	Sociology	1	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Joey	24	Mexican	Kinesiology	3	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Chris	21	Mexican	Kinesiology	1	FT	No	Yes	Doctorate
Brandon	21	Mexican	Biochemistry	4	PT	No	No	Doctorate
Adam	30	Mexican	Political Science	2	FT	Yes	No	MA
Vincent	24	Mexican	Marketing	1	FT	No	Yes	MA
Matthew	21	Mexican	Forensic Psychology	1	FT	Yes	Yes	MA
Ethan	23	Mexican	Multimedia Art/ Design	1	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Alex	23	Mexican/ Salvadoran	Aerospace Engineering	3	FT	Yes	Yes	MA
Jorge	27	Mexican	Counseling	1	FT	Yes	Yes	MA
Sergio	20	Mexican	Mathematics	2	FT	No	Yes	BA
Damien	26	Mexican	Social Science	2	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Hector	26	Mexican	Food & Nutrition	2	FT	Yes	Yes	Doctorate
Mark	28	Mexican	Film	3	FT	Yes	Yes	BA
Erick	27	Mexican	Communications	2	FT	Yes	Yes	MA
Jesse	22	Mexican	Civil Engineering	2	FT	No	No	MA
Greg	28	Mexican/ Guatemalan	Political Science	2	FT	No	Yes	Doctorate
Joseph	22	Mexican	Economics & Environmental Engineering	1	FT	Yes	Yes	JD
Sam	21	Mexican	Criminal Justice	2	FT	Yes	Yes	JD