

Latinos in a College Outreach Program: Application, Selection, and Participation

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College outreach programs provide key access along the academic pipeline, yet little is known about how students access or engage with these programs. Data were collected as part of a university–community partnership. Analyses of student applications revealed that most had aspirations for college-based careers. They saw institutions, family members, and school personnel as resources to achieve their goals, and institutions and relationships as obstacles. Program selection reflected students' gender and criteria among school staff about who would benefit the most from the program. Program participation was motivated by both their social and academic goals and whether they saw themselves as a resource.

Key words: Latinos, career goals, college outreach programs, early adolescents

In the United States in 1997, 36% of Latino students entered college after high school, compared to 46% of White and 39% of African American students (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). To help Latino and other ethnic minority and low-income students build pathways to college, outreach programs offer cultural, institutional, relational, and personal bridges (Gándara, 1996; Gibson, 1997; Hayward, Brandes, Kirst, & Mazzeo, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In recent years, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have begun to study these programs and map how challenges and resources interact along students' successful pathways to college (Cooper, Cooper, Azmitia, Chavira, & Gullatt, 2002; Fisher, 1998; Gándara & Bial, 2001). However, little is known about either the process through which students become and stay involved in college outreach programs, or how they think about their goals, obstacles, and resources on their educational pathways.

In this study, we examine the processes of student application, program selection, and student participation in a community college outreach program that serves primarily Latino, low-income students. The program was begun by local philanthropists in 1991 to increase low-income students' access to college. The founder, Robert Swenson, was inspired by Eugene Lang's I Have a Dream Program (Kahne, 1999) and built endowments from private donors. Students apply and are selected in sixth or seventh grade. The yearly cycle of activities includes a spring awards ceremony, tutoring, counseling and guidance, Fall and Spring Saturday Academies, college visits, and Summer Institutes at the community college, where students learn about college, strengthen academic skills with college-aged tutors, and meet other students with college goals. Students receive a \$1,000 scholarship when they enroll in the community college and their families participate in information activities.

This program nurtures college-bound identities by offering close relationships to adults, college students, and peers, as well as guidance in college-prep course selection, study skills, and activities involving their families. It resembles other college outreach programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, Upward Bound, and Project GRAD (Fashola & Slavin, 1997; Perna, 2002), but differs in that students attend community colleges in addition to 4-year universities. These programs also vary as to which components—such as mentoring, test preparation, family involvement, or scholarships—are offered and where and when they occur, whether during school, weekends, or summer (Gándara & Bial, 2001). The study described in this article was part of a larger investigation of contexts and pathways from childhood to college across ethnically diverse communities (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Cooper, Dominguez, & Rosas, in press).

This article explores the process of selection into the program and the students' later participation. The research is designed to address concerns of policymakers like the California Legislative Analysts' Office, who asked the University of California to "evaluate the extent to which selection criteria of programs and participa-

tion decisions of students affect outcomes” (Legislative Analysts’ Office, 1998, p. 1). This study also addresses the questions of practitioners in schools and community programs who want to strengthen college pathways but struggle with low program participation (Quinn, 1997). Finally, this study speaks to research questions about the interaction among individual students, schools, and outreach programs over time as ethnically diverse students move along pathways through school (Cooper et al., 2002).

This study was made possible by a partnership between the college outreach program and a university research team. Bringing together research and practice in purpose, content, and method reflects what Boyer (1990) called the “scholarship of integration” (p. 16). Like other university–community partnerships, research was done in the context of a specific program and linked to theoretical and policy issues that speak to national and international debates on equity and access to education (Cooper & Denner, 1998; Denner, Cooper, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1999). It is participatory action research because of its implications for university scholars, program funders, teachers, policymakers, youth, and program staff. Our partnership reaches across ethnicity, language, social class, and age to increase ethnic minority and low-income children’s access to schooling and occupational choice (Cooper, 1997).

STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON GOALS, OBSTACLES, AND RESOURCES

Consistent with the long-standing focus on risk among ethnic minority youth, we know more about the obstacles than the resources for these students’ college and career goals. Some students face institutional obstacles such as money, transportation, or racism in school tracking (Fine, 1991). Studies of low-income African American and Latino students report relational obstacles across the worlds of families, peers, and schools (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Some students see their parents as obstacles when they set family needs for financial help or child care as priorities over education (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, Lopez, & Dunbar, 1995) or when immigrant parents lack familiarity with schools and with program and college applications (Valdivieso, 1990). Families may have lower aspirations for girls than for boys (Gándara, 1995; Henderson, 1997). Some students see peers as obstacles to their school or college identities and aspirations (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and teachers can be “gatekeepers” whether a student takes college-prep or remedial classes (Cooper et al., 1995). Personal obstacles such as low self-esteem (Harter, 1990) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) can also undermine students’ ability to accomplish their goals. There is clearly overlap in these categories, as studies have shown that perceptions of ethnic discrimination are related to self-esteem and perceived control (Phinney, Madden, & Santos, 1998; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997).

Institutions, relationships, and personal qualities can also be positive resources along students' pathways to college and careers. Institutions such as schools, community organizations, and universities offer scholarships, although eligibility often depends on students' English skills and immigrant status (Stanton-Salazar, Vásquez, & Mehan, 1996). From relationships, youth can draw emotional and instrumental support. Families and peers can provide resources with their aspirations, encouragement, and guidance (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996; Reese, Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Balzano, 1995). Students benefit when teachers and counselors are "cultural brokers" who connect them to scholarships and outreach programs that support college and career dreams (Cooper et al., 1999; Gándara, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Stanton-Salazar et al., 1996). Students also draw on personal strengths like working hard and being a good student to achieve goals (Day, Borkowski, Punzo, & Howespian, 1994).

This study built on this work by using a challenge–resource model (Cooper et al., 2002) that suggests that the interplay of challenges and resources can promote development. For example, in some cases poverty and racism can motivate youth to pursue resources like outreach programs and succeed academically on behalf of their family and community. In cultural contexts that include beliefs about being a moral person and values of family support (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995), students often aspire to careers that can help their families and communities (Kroesen, Reese, & Gallimore, 1998).

SELECTION FOR THE PROGRAM

Recent policies have increased federal and state funding for college outreach programs like AVID, Puente, the Early Academic Outreach Program, Upward Bound, Talent Search, and GEAR UP (Cooper, 2002; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Perna, 2002). These programs vary in both demographic and academic criteria for eligibility and selection. Demographic requirements may include low family income (based on eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches), parents who did not graduate from 4-year colleges, ethnicity, or national origin (being U.S.-born). Academic criteria range from competitive to more inclusive to compensatory. For example, AVID targets high school students scoring average to high on standardized tests but getting average grades; the high school Puente program targets students across a broad range of school performance (Cooper, 2002; Gándara, Larson, Mehan, & Rumberger, 1998). These criteria, as with college admissions, reflect funding shifts and growing pressure to show success.

Selection criteria do not fully explain how students get into programs, and why they stay in. Whether programs use local or common eligibility criteria, we expect that selection will reflect institutional, relational, and personal dimensions. In this

study, we examine the role of these dimensions in relation to how students gain access to and participate in one local program.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Even when students are selected for a program, not all participate. Participation in out-of-school and college outreach programs declines as youth move through adolescence (Quinn, 1997). During this same time, students start to envision their possible futures and choose classes and activities that shape their eligibility for college (Nurmi, 1989; Trice, 1991). Students spend more time with peers, a major influence on who attends programs and develops college-bound or non-college-bound identities (Mehan et al., 1995). By the time students enter middle school, their expectations and pathways toward college already reflect their classes, grades, and identities (Baker & Stevenson, 1994; Cooper et al., 1999). For this reason, growing numbers of college outreach programs, including the federal GEAR UP program, begin in sixth and seventh grades to reach students before their aspirations—or those of their families and teachers—dim.

The few studies of participation in college outreach programs reveal high attrition and high numbers of girls (Edgert & Taylor, 1996; Gándara & Bial, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Studies of out-of-school programs find youth participate when they feel connected to staff, have fun, see their friends, learn, feel safe, or make progress toward their future goals (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). Program participation is also related to access to transportation and parent permission (Ngai & Cheung, 1997). Student characteristics (e.g., gender, immigration, and language skills) may also predict participation because they are linked to seeking support, educational aspirations, and school performance (Buriel, 1994; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Little is known about whether participation is related to how students think about their future goals, obstacles, and resources.

In sum, this study investigates students' perspectives on their career goals, and the obstacles and resources to reaching those goals as expressed in their program applications. It also explores the processes of selection and participation in one college outreach program. Three research questions are addressed:

1. What career goals, obstacles, and resources did sixth- and seventh-grade Latino students describe in their program application essays? We expected that students from low-income families would mention institutional obstacles like money most frequently, followed by relational obstacles, and that they would identify more personal than institutional resources.
2. How were students selected into this community college outreach program? There are no specific hypotheses.

3. What factors were associated with participation in the college outreach program? There are no specific hypotheses.

METHOD

The community partnership described in this article is a cultural research partnership created by Catherine R. Cooper and the program director in 1995. The partnership is ongoing, and involves regular meetings with program and research staff, funders, families, and youth to identify questions and integrate data collection and analysis with program activities (Cooper, Brown, Azmitia, & Chavira, in press). Program staff and youth participate in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and research staff participate in program planning, delivery, and communicating with funders (see Denner et al., 1999, for more detail). We use a nonexperimental design, found to be common in other youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This approach is called a *natural experiment* in that it does not, for ethical reasons, constrain or randomly assign who receives program benefits. This design does not allow us to test causal hypotheses or to control for self-selection.

Participants

Program recruitment proceeded as follows. Each fall, income-eligible sixth or seventh graders in the five elementary and middle schools where program scholarship donors had established endowments were invited to apply. The director made recruitment presentations in Spanish, English, or both in classes or lunch-time assemblies, where she told students about college, the program, eligibility based on family income, the selection process, and the essay application. As part of the application, students were asked to write an essay with the following instructions:

Think of yourself in your ideal job. Describe your job. How has that changed your life? Explain how you reached your ideal/dream job. What were your obstacles? How did you overcome these obstacles? How will you help your family and community?

Students could write in either English or Spanish. Most students in this study (62%) wrote in English. Essays in the Appendix illustrate how students described a range of goals, obstacles, and resources.

In 1995, 1996, and 1997, 353 sixth- and seventh-grade students applied to the community college outreach program. Of these, 237 were selected to participate, and we obtained parental consent to include 140 of these students in the study (59% of those selected). For the primary analysis, we focused on 116 students who

had a Spanish surname ($n = 116$; 76 girls and 40 boys). To examine the program's selection process, this study also included an additional 53 students who applied but were not selected for the program. Few parents declined to participate; rather, the program director said that low levels of parental consent reflect the modest reading skills of parents who did not attend school beyond elementary (*primaria*) in Mexico.

Of the 116 students on which most of our analyses focus, 94 (81%) were sixth graders from three elementary schools and 22 (19%) were seventh graders from two middle schools. The students were living in two communities in a central California county: 34% in a small city with a majority White population in the north county and 66% in a rural, predominantly Spanish-speaking community in the south county. Sixty-two percent of the students were born in the United States and 38% in Mexico. Among parents, 73% reported at least one parent was born outside the United States. According to community and school census records, the high number of Latino students in the sample is representative of schools in the south county, but not in the north county. The community college is located midway between the two communities. All were from low-income families, as indicated by eligibility for free or reduced-price federal lunch programs at their schools.

Procedure: Measures and Coding

Career goals, obstacles, and resources in students' application essays. Jill Denner (White and proficient in Spanish) and a bilingual Latina research assistant coded the career goals, obstacles, and resources students described in each application essay. Coding was conducted independently and discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. Program staff were consulted throughout the coding process to ensure the categories were meaningful. Students' career goals were coded based on social class ranking (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958) ranging from 1 (*higher executives and major professionals*) to 7 (*unskilled employees*), with Cohen's $\kappa = .97$. For example, higher executives (coded as 1) included doctors, lawyers, and pilots. Lesser professionals included business managers, computer specialists, and nurses. Minor professionals included administrative personnel, teachers, and athletes.

Students' application essays were coded in two steps. First, each obstacle and resource was coded into one or more of three categories: institutional, relational, and personal. Obstacles were factors students perceived would impede achieving their career goals, and resources were factors that would enhance their success in doing so. Institutional obstacles included money, language, and transportation; institutional resources included bank loans or scholarships. Relational obstacles included parents not being supportive or peer pressure, and relational resources included asking for help from a friend or family member. Personal obstacles

included self-doubt, and personal resources included studying hard or resisting temptations. Cohen's kappa for obstacles was .94, and .78 for resources.

To explore students' understanding of resources, a grounded theory method of inductive coding (Glaser, 1992) was used to create subcategories of resources. Institutional resources were coded as either school-based (e.g., graduating from high school or going to college) or non-school-based (e.g., ways institutions might help get them a job or a bank loan). Relational resources were coded as either instrumental (e.g., guidance or connections for getting a job) or emotional (e.g., seeking encouragement, or recognizing parents' sacrifices for their children). Personal resources were coded as persistence (e.g., studying or working hard) or sacrifice to achieve long-term goals (e.g., resisting temptation, sacrificing time with family or friends).

Student selection into the program. Data on selection were obtained by interviewing program staff, examining program records, and conducting field observations during recruitment and selection meetings in five schools. Our research team conducted observations of the selection meetings held at each school, where teachers and school administrators discussed the essays and eligibility criteria with the program director.

Program participation. Students' program participation was measured using program attendance records and the director's reports of contact with each student. First, an attendance score was calculated by dividing the number of program activities each student attended by the number of possible activities for each student, resulting in a score that ranged from 0 (*no events attended*) to 1 (*all possible events attended*). Second, the director, who also provided individual counseling and group activities, rated the amount of contact she had with each student as 0 (*none*), 1 (*some*), or 2 (*much*). These attendance and contact scores were combined to code each student on a scale from 1 (*not engaged*) to 4 (*highly engaged*). Students were coded as not engaged if they attended no activities and had no contact with the director and as highly engaged if they attended more than half the activities regardless of contact with the director, or attended more than one third and had some or much contact with the director.

To assess students' reasons for participation, at the end of two Saturday Academies, students were asked to write their answer to this open-ended question: What made you come today? Responses were inductively coded by Jill Denner into meaningful categories based on research on why students participate in programs (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997), also allowing for previously unreported reasons to emerge.

RESULTS

Students' Perspectives on Their Career Goals,
Obstacles, and Resources

In their application essays, almost half the students described career goals as higher executives or major professionals (46%), with the most common being doctor and lawyer. Another 19% described jobs as minor professionals, such as teachers and athletes. Eight students did not identify a specific goal. There were no significant differences in students' career goals by gender, country of birth, or application essay language.

Obstacles. In anticipating their careers, most students (76%) described at least one type of obstacle and 44% described more than one. As shown in Table 1, most obstacles students listed were institutional or relational, with fewer mentioning personal obstacles. The following quotes illustrate the different types of obstacles:

Paying for college was so hard. That was my biggest obstacle because I had to work and study at the same time. (institutional)

My parents wanted to take me to work in the fields because we didn't have much money and I told them I don't want to go to the fields. (translated from Spanish; relational)

I would get really lazy when I would go to school. (translated from Spanish; personal)

TABLE 1
Obstacles and Resources of Latino Youth: Demographic Profile
(Percentage of Total Sample)

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>U.S.-Born</i>	<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Spanish</i>
<i>N</i>	116	76	40	69	42	67	41
Obstacles							
Institutional	49	52	42	40	59	48	46
Relational	46	43	50	43	50	50	37
Personal	34	32	37	32	38	29	39
Resources							
Institutional	66	63	71	77	69	78	59
Relational	34	30	34	35	31	38	24
Personal	53	48	58	55	64	44	56

Resources. Most students (85%) described at least one type of resource and 62% more than one, with 14% citing all three. As shown in Table 1, the most common were institutional and personal, followed by relational. The following are examples:

When I went [sic] to college they offered [sic] me some help. I said “sure where can I get that help.” They said where [sic] going to help you by paying your classes. (institutional)

I got this job with the help of the teacher Mrs Flores. Because she helped me to stay in school. (relational)

I got this job staying [sic] in school and college. Not using drugs and drinking. I’m an architect now because I studied hard at school. (personal)

The second phase of coding the application essays reveals that students perceived school-based institutional resources ($n = 67$, 78% of those reporting an institutional resource) more often than nonschool resources like banks or public transportation ($n = 18$, 21%). Overall, they reported relational resources involving emotional and instrumental support with similar frequencies. Their personal resources involved persistence in the face of difficulty ($n = 50$, 78%) more than sacrificing leisure time or resisting temptations ($n = 14$, 22%).

There were some gender differences in types of resources described. Relational resources were most often adult family members (74% for girls, 59% for boys), and only boys (12%) mentioned God as a resource. For personal resources, girls described mostly persistence (e.g., “I reached my ideal job by working hard to pass my grades, getting good grades, good behavior”), whereas boys described both persistence and resisting temptation (e.g., “*No usar drogas o bebidas [sic]*”—not use drugs or drink).

Demographic patterns in application essays. Few demographic differences occur in students’ perceptions of their obstacles and resources. Students born in Mexico reported more institutional obstacles (59%) than those born in the United States (40%), $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 3.70, p = .05$. Students who wrote in English (77%) described more institutional resources than those writing in Spanish (60%), $\chi^2(1, N = 106) = 3.59, p < .05$. Students aspiring to the highest level of career goals on the Hollingshead scale (requiring the most education) reported the fewest relational obstacles, $\chi^2(5, N = 107) = 10.78, p = .05$.

Students' Selection Into the Program

Selection of students usually took place during a meeting among the school principal, teachers, and the program director, but observations revealed a great deal of local variation in recruitment and selection. Some teachers assigned the application essays as homework, and others offered them as extra credit or optional work. At two schools, teachers first read and rated essays on their own, and the director used their recommendations to select students. Criteria for selection varied, with some teachers nominating students who excelled academically, whereas other teachers nominated students with difficulties at home or school who could use extra support or recognition. Others were chosen because a friend or sibling was already in the program and teachers felt these ties would increase the likelihood of the student participating. Thus, access to program opportunities occurred by more than one pathway and reflected students' essays, their relationships with school staff, and teachers' beliefs about who would benefit from the program.

Interviews with teachers and the program director indicated they took care not to consider the prestige of students' career goals in selection. Instead, teachers described the importance of *corazon* (literally, *heart* in Spanish), the heartfelt emotion for helping their communities. An example of such *corazon* appears in one application essay, written in Spanish at age 12:

I would like to be a writer for children's stories. I would like to write stories that will teach children many things, like becoming interested in reading. I want to help my community by finding economical resources so that the children don't leave their studies and other things. With my determination and effort I will successfully accomplish my goal to obtain these career. My obstacles are that I have cerebral palsy. Another obstacle is the English language.

We also examined the selection process by comparing students selected for the program with their peers from the same school who applied to the program who were not selected. Data were only available from one school. Students were compared on demographics (gender, immigration, and language) as well as essay content (career goals, resources, and obstacles). Among the 81 students who applied, more girls than boys were selected (82% of girls vs. 53% of boys), $\chi^2(1, N = 81) = 6.75, p < .01$. Interviews with teachers and program personnel suggested that girls might have had a better chance of being selected because they were seen as more well behaved and less likely to disrupt program events. Other factors, such as country of birth, essay language, and essay content were not related to selection.

Program Participation

A participation score based on attendance at program activities and director's report of contact ranged from 1 to 4, and was high on average ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .93$, $n = 108$). There were no significant differences by students' gender, country of birth, or essay language. Analysis of variance indicated participation did vary depending on a combination of essay content and student gender, $F(3, 104) = 3.32$, $p < .05$. Participation was higher among those girls who identified themselves as resources, but higher for those boys who did not do so.

Students' reasons for participating in program activities reflect both social and academic goals. Following a Saturday Academy that focused on college, careers, and *Día de los Muertos* (the Mexican Day of the Dead), students ($n = 34$) reported they had come to meet people or see friends (27%), learn (24%), get help with homework, or because their parents made them come (24%). Following a Saturday Academy with activities on college, careers, and alternatives to violence, students ($n = 37$) reported they came because they saw the program as a resource (42%), to learn (40%), and to learn more about the program and for the food.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to research on how low-income Latino students access and engage academic outreach programs to help them stay on pathways to college. The research was conducted as part of a university–community partnership designed to address research questions that are relevant to a range of stakeholders. The findings show how early adolescents think about their career goals, and obstacles and resources to achieving their goals. They also highlight the processes of selection and participation in one community college outreach program.

Application Essays: Student Perspectives on Their Goals, Obstacles, and Resources

The students who applied to the program described aspirations for college-based careers that serve their families and communities. This finding contrasts with common perceptions that Latino students and families have low future aspirations and cultural values that are inconsistent with education. Their dreams of attending college are consistent with studies of Mexican immigrant parents from the same communities (Henderson, 1997; Matute-Bianchi, 1986), many of whom worked in semiskilled or unskilled positions in restaurants and hotels, factories, and agricultural fields or canneries, but held aspirations for college and college-based careers for their children (Azmitia et al., 1996). Similar to research with international samples (Nurmi, 1989), and consistent with the challenge–resource model (Cooper et

al., 2002), by sixth or seventh grade, students both recognized obstacles to their goals and saw resources to reach those goals.

Students' views of institutions were more optimistic than previous research on older students would suggest. Much research on Latino students focuses on obstacles (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Mehan et al., 1995). In a study of high schools, Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that early negative experiences with institutional agents can lead to a reduction in help seeking. However, the middle school students in the study reported here also described institutions such as colleges, libraries, and banks as resources, particularly for financial assistance. Personal attributes or personal efforts made by the student were also frequently described, suggesting that early adolescents still have a great deal of optimism about their ability to affect their future. Like other studies of college outreach programs (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000), over half the students described themselves as key resources for achieving their goals, citing their own persistence in getting good grades and working hard. Although relying on oneself may not be enough to overcome certain obstacles like financial needs (DeLeón, 1996), a student's belief in his or her ability is important in staying on the pathway toward that goal (Baker & Stevenson, 1994; Bandura, 1997). As discussed later, viewing oneself as a resource had different implications for boys' and girls' program participation.

Gender played a role in reported obstacles and resources, participation, and selection into the program. A greater proportion of girls than boys were selected for the program, consistent with reports of more Latino girls than boys in college outreach programs (Edgert & Taylor, 1992, 1996). Girls also reported career goals that require equal or higher levels of education than boys, unlike the eighth-grade Latinas in another study (Yowell, 2000). In this study, boys reported more resources overall, perhaps reflecting greater physical mobility outside of these programs. However, girls reported fewer relational obstacles to their goals than did boys, and more support from family members, despite widely held beliefs that Latino families restrict girls' access to higher education. Previous studies have also found gender differences in the nature of relationships. For example Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that girls were more emotionally invested in their relationships with their families, resulting in greater conflict, more intimacy, but lower perceived support. To understand these findings and differential educational access for Latino boys and girls, more research is needed on changing gender role expectations for early adolescents (Denner & Dunbar, 2004).

Selection for the Program

The selection process relied heavily on local criteria. School personnel considered factors they believed influence student participation, such as family need and student initiative. Overall, selection had little to do with the career goals or obstacles students described in their application, possibly because most identified college-based ca-

reers. The program, unlike other college outreach programs (Fashola & Slavin, 1997; Gándara et al., 1998) did not regulate selection criteria, and assumptions about who will benefit most varied across schools. Compared to other college outreach programs, the one in this study is unusual in its acceptance of students who range in their academic performance. Future research should examine whether targeting the most or least at-risk students or a combination affects outcomes. Programs would benefit from data on students who were selected for their personal resources, as compared to their academic, financial, or emotional needs.

Program Participation

Research on what motivates and prevents students from participating can help programs sustain engagement. Students' program participation was related to both academic and social factors: Many saw it as a resource for their personal college goals, but many also attended activities to see friends. College outreach programs can build on this desire to see peers by including activities that build supportive peer groups (Gándara et al., 1998). Many programs are underutilized by youth they hope to serve and that participation declines among older youth even though more sustained participation is linked to greater gains (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Programs can build on nonacademic reasons for participating, including parents who require children to attend for their own benefit or to chaperone younger siblings or cousins.

This study also contributes to research on gender differences in participation. Girls who saw themselves as resources to achieve their goals were more likely to participate, whereas the reverse was true for boys. This indicates there may be gender differences in the meaning of participation. For girls, an active strategy of persistence toward a goal may lead to higher participation, whereas for boys, the need to resist temptation (described more often by boys) does not necessarily lead to participation. To increase involvement by males, programs might emphasize how they can help students avoid negative peers and other distractions that prevent them from reaching their goals. Programs that help students identify positive relational resources might be also particularly important for boys. Another study of this same program revealed that older youth and boys were less likely to attend program activities because of peer pressure to avoid being "uncool" and because of work obligations (Mena et al., 2001). Further studies of what kinds of students use program resources and why will inform selection and retention.

Implications for Policy, Educational Programs, and Research

This study holds implications for policy questions about eligibility and access to education because it is one of the few to describe the processes of selection and student participation. In this program, local criteria about who would benefit most de-

terminated who was selected to be in the program. Debates about the effects of local versus general criteria for selection and how selection criteria affect outcomes can be addressed by further research. As programs are scaled up to a national level, or scaled down in economic downturns, funding sources shift and increase pressure to set consistent eligibility criteria across sites, a practice that may prevent programs from considering the local realities of students, families, schools, and programs (Cooper, 2002; Perna, 2002). This study also adds to those that focus on promoting learning, rather than only protecting youth from challenges and risks (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The findings have implications for programs that aim to help Latino students and their families pursue their educational dreams. Schools offer little career guidance before high school (Raskin, 1994), yet programs can build from the aspirations that many sixth and seventh graders already have for a career that requires a college education, regardless of whether their goals change. In their applications, students in sixth grade recognized relationships as both challenges and resources, similar to African American and Latino high school students (Cooper et al., 2002; Cooper et al., 1995). Programs can help students locate resources and negotiate relational obstacles by building bridges between home, peers, and school (Gándara, 1996).

Programs can also help students access institutional resources like career counseling, jobs, or financial aid. These skills may be particularly important for girls, English-language learners, and immigrants, who in this study were less likely to see institutions as resources for education and rather described the fewest resources and the most obstacles overall. Like others have found (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002) the students in this study described money and transportation as obstacles to their career goals, but also saw schools, banks, and community programs as resources, indicating these early adolescents had not lost faith in institutions (Ortiz & Gonzales, 1996). Programs that begin in elementary or middle school can help students before they lose faith in institutions. Research suggests sixth- and seventh-grade students are moving from believing their achievements depend only on their own efforts (Skinner, 1990) to recognizing the influence of other people and institutions.

Limitations and Future Directions

The research focused on youth of Mexican descent, and cannot be generalized to all Latino students in the program, nor to all Latino students in the five schools. As mentioned earlier, self-selection bias is inherent in the natural experiment method commonly used to study out-of-school programs. In this study, the students who provided parental consent were those most actively involved in the program.

This research was also limited by using essay language and birthplace rather than more specific measures of acculturation or time in the United States. Scholars

have documented immigrant optimism and its loss associated with time in U.S. schools among Mexican-descent students. For example, bilingual students are more likely than monolingual students to access institutional resources (Stanton-Salazar et al., 1996) and students who are more recent immigrants are more likely to have engaged academic identities (Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Future studies of early adolescents entering college outreach programs may benefit from including measures of cultural identity and acculturation.

Despite these limitations, these findings contribute to a gap in research on how Latino early adolescents access and engage with academic outreach programs. These programs present challenges to researchers because they have limited staff capacity, institutional fragility, and high attrition (Gándara & Bial, 2001). The university–community research partnership allowed us to create systems to conduct research relevant to a range of stakeholders, including youth, families, schools, funders, and program leaders. The activities, measures, and data analysis templates developed in the partnership have been adopted by teachers in the GEAR UP program and K–16 partnerships that serve middle school students in one school district (Domínguez et al., 2001).

By taking seriously and building on students' aspirations for the future during childhood, these programs may help students and their families sustain realistic optimism about their career and educational pathways. Future research can explore these issues with Latino students who do not participate in such programs. For the growing numbers of youth who do so, several pressing questions remain: How are Latino students' perceptions of obstacles and resources influenced by programs? Do perceptions change as a result of participation? How do selection criteria influence how students benefit from the program? Answers to these questions will help research, program, and policy work together to strengthen the educational pathways of Latino youth.

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APPENDIX

Student Essays

Sample Essay by Female Student

There's one great and important job that we all need in our community. Being a Patrol Sergeant is very hard sometimes, but this job is very important because we're very helpful for our community. I have done a variety of assignments [sic] including investigations-crimes against children. Being a Patrol Sergeant would change anybody's life to a great life. Being a Patrol Sergeant changed my life because now I feel 25% of all the things that happen in this community. Now I could help many people and children, and I'm happy and I feel satisfied.

There are many ways to reach your ideal job. I reached my ideal job by working hard (extremely hard) through middle school, high school, college, and UCLA university. One very big challenge was that I had to always work on was, doing my best and never act negative or have a bad attitude.

There's always a lot of obstacles to pass through life. An obstacle I had in college [sic] was that I was living just with my mom and I wasn't getting enough support from her, my family, and my friends. There always has to be a way to overcome your obstacles. I overcome this obstacles [sic] by getting more support from teachers and getting to know great friends. I tried to ignore my families [sic] problems and look up to my mom as if she was two persons, my dad and mom. There's always a way to help this community and of course your family. I'm helping my community by doing my best on helping all I can help out. I get to help my parents with money, when their [sic] out of money.

Sample Essay by Male Student

I am a lawyer in the US. When I was in school, I wanted to be an architect. I was born in Jalisco Mexico. I have a brother, I am the oldest. I lived in Mexico for 12 years. My lawyer career is very interesting. This work I like a lot because I like to defend the people. My ideal job I got studying a lot. Also not leaving the school. Being a good student. My obstacles were laziness. That my parents did not have enough money to send me to college. My parents worked a lot to give us an education. Also the gangs were a bad influence. Now I help the community get poor people from the prison I hope that all the children study like me so they can be someone in life. Those who study don't work in the field. In sum, don't leave school.