

Framing the Future: Exploring how the Children of Latinx Immigrants Connect Past, Present, and Future during their College Decision-Making Process

**By: Leslie Patricia Luqueño, Ph.D. Candidate
Stanford University-Graduate School of Education
10 February 2023**

Abstract:

Drawing upon interview data from a qualitative, yearlong study with 14 children of Latinx immigrants applying to college, I explore how students' visions of their futures shape their college decision-making processes. I utilize possible selves theory as a guiding framework, which refers to how people imagine who they may become in the future, which can guide their actions (Markus and Nurius 1986). I explore the following three research questions: 1) how do children of Latinx immigrants conceive of their possible futures, both within higher education and beyond?, 2) what is the connection between student and familial pasts in the conceptualization of educational futures, and 3) how do their conceptions of the future shape their higher education decision-making?

What I find is that students think about variable possible versions of themselves simultaneously in their decision-making. Specifically, I focus on conceptualizations of the college self, the career self, and the familial self to examine how each individually shapes different tangible college considerations (i.e. majors, locations, finances) and also how they interplay to influence students' sense making as they decide whether and where to pursue higher education. This paper contributes to current research on college choice/decision-making, the application of possible selves theory to postsecondary education work, and increased insight on the role of immigrant origins in the construction of higher education aspirations amongst the children of Latinx immigrants.

Introduction

The college decision-making process is a complex task that requires students to account for various factors such as potential majors, locations, finances, social life opportunities, and more (Iloh, 2018; Perez and McDonough, 2008; Perna, 2006). The postsecondary institution a student attends can have a significant impact on their success in higher education and future career prospects (Perez and McDonough, 2008; Mariscal, 2021). College decision-making can also influence likelihood of degree attainment, area of study, and sense of belonging (Perna 2006). The growing Latinx population faces unique challenges in the college selection process, and understanding how students navigate it can help to address gaps in enrollment and support them in pursuing postsecondary education.

The college decision-making process also takes into account non-academic factors, as colleges serve multiple purposes in a student's life, including providing opportunities for independence, upward mobility, making families proud, and more (Cuevas 2021). For students from marginalized communities, college can be a stepping stone toward a better future. The pursuit of higher education is often seen as the pathway to upward mobility and middle-class status, and a college degree remains important for entry into many well-paying careers (Chetty et al 2017; Terriquez 2014; Torche 2011). For first-generation-to-college students, it can also be a break from social reproduction (Jack, 2019).

This paper is based on a year-long qualitative study with 14 Latinx immigrant children from Southeast Los Angeles as they applied to college. The study explores how these students conceive of their future, the connection between their pasts and their educational futures, and how their future aspirations influence college decision-making. I utilize possible selves theory, which links motivation to future aspirations, to examine how these students construct their

possible selves through the interplay of immigration, higher education, and familial history. I ask the following research questions:

- 1) How do children of Latinx immigrants conceive of their possible futures, both within higher education and beyond?
- 2) What is the connection between student and familial pasts in the conceptualization of educational futures?
- 3) How do students' futuristic conceptions shape their higher education decision-making?

The findings suggest that immigrant origin, socioeconomic class, and ethnic identity interlink to motivate multiple possible selves, including college, career, and familial selves, which influence college decision-making by shaping how students approach tangible considerations. This paper contributes to our understanding of how Latinx immigrant students consider their past, present, and future during the college application and decision-making process, providing insights into higher education considerations and the interplay of multiple desires for the self in postsecondary education planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toward a Holistic Perspective on College Choice and Decision-Making Processes

My work builds upon and contributes to college decision-making research, most known as college 'choice.' College choice refers to the process by which students decide whether and where to pursue higher education. College choice literature began through a series of proposed models that claimed to explain how students arrive at their final higher education decisions, most emphasizing the role of first conceiving that higher education was a goal and then moving to acquiring increased information about the best institutional options for them (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Perhaps the most popular model was Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model: predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage

emphasized parental educational history and high school college-going cultures, arguing that students who had direct role models who went to college before them were more ‘predisposed’ to go to college. Inversely, underrepresented students within higher education would not be as predisposed because they do not have the same educational lineage. However, it assumes that only familial educational histories are valuable at the point of predisposition, which my paper disputes by showing how other sources of knowledge also matter in setting students up for higher education aspirations.

Since its inception, scholars have critiqued that the existing models: 1) assume that students all had access to quality information regarding higher education institutions, 2) privileged the ‘predisposition’ of the White middle-class and made them the ‘ideal’ college applicant, and 3) treated ‘choice’ as fully-agentic and did not consider how students’ ‘choices’ may actually be constrained by social inequality and life circumstances (Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006; Rosales, 2022). I draw inspiration from other holistic models of college choice have been proposed, such as Constance Iloh’s Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories (Iloh, 2018) and Jesenia Rosales’s Latinx Undocumented Student College Choice Model (Rosales, 2022). These models are more attentive to students’ embeddedness in social context and ecology, emphasizing the role of multiple actors, institutions, and contexts in the construction of students’ decision-making. Furthermore, they also draw in how families, policies, and networks contest the idea that college ‘choice’ is even a choice for many students (Darche-Gabino et al., 2018; Iloh, 2018; Rosales, 2022). Although I do not propose nor work within a model, I do draw upon social ecological driven conceptions of college choice (or as I refer to it as: college decision-making to defy that higher education is about choices for all

students) to inform how I think about the role of possible selves in decision-making and that their construction is socially and historically constructed.

The Children of Latinx Immigrants and Higher Education Aspirations, Applications, and Decisions

College enrollment and completion is a common measure in studies about immigrant generational status and educational attainment (Baum and Flores, 2011; Ichou, 2014; Keller and Tillman, 2008). This is not a surprise given the frequent perception that going to college may be the ‘great American equalizer’ that can springboard upward mobility (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Chetty et al., 2020; Torche, 2011). Therefore, higher education becomes a powerful crux in the journey of immigrant descendants and one that has been of interest for their intergenerational progression (Baum and Flores, 2011; Feliciano, 2020; Warikoo, 2022)

Amongst Latinx students, there is a plethora of work that highlights their interactions with higher education, from the assemblage of college aspirations (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005; Kiyama, 2010) to their navigation of the college application process (Carolan-Silva and Reyes, 2013; Irizzary, 2012) and how they come to decide whether and where to pursue their further education (Clayton et al., 2017; Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018; Perez and McDonough, 2008). Some of the work paints a grim picture, detailing how despite increased efforts to enroll students in college, their college completion rates as a group have stagnated (Contreras and Contreras, 2015; Gonzalez, 2015; Santiago and Soliz, 2012). Despite increased enrollment in college post-high school graduation, Latinx students are overrepresented in the community college sector and both the completion of an Associate’s degree and transfer from a junior college to a 4-year university rates have remained significantly lower than the overall enrollment rates (Saéñz et al., 2018; Teranishi et al., 2011). Yet other research points to how familial and cultural resources

help the children of Latinx immigrants persevere against structural obstacles and inequality (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Ceja, 2004; Fernandez-Kelly, 2008). Though not dismissive of the significant inequality the children of Latinx immigrants face, this line of research provides an assets-based perspective of how families and communities provide a strong foundation for college aspirations and subsequent enrollment (Carey, 2021; Cuevas, 2021; Nava, 2016). It points to how parents, siblings, extended family, and more involve themselves as students apply to college and where they decide to attend (Delgado, 2020; Mariscal, 2021; Salazar, 2021).

For Latinx immigrant descendants, we must also pay close attention to how intersecting identities may shape higher education aspirations and pathways differently (Nuñez, 2014). In particular, issues concerning first-generation-to-college and socioeconomic status (Gable, 2021; Jack, 2019; Delgado 2020), individual and familial citizenship status (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2015; Salazar, 2021), and language (Kanno and Kangas, 2014; Leo, 2021; Nuñez et al., 2016) may be increasingly prevalent and should be addressed alongside immigrant and ethnic identities. Furthermore, their familial histories and current states may have a strong influence on college and after-college aspirations, which can shape their postsecondary education possibilities even if their parents and ancestors did not pursue college themselves. This paper attempts to bridge the influence of immigrant pasts and presents in relation to students' desired futures.

Conceptual Framework

I use Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius's possible selves theory to explain how children of immigrants' visions of futurity guide their college decision-making processes. The theory of possible self derived from psychological work that examined how people construct their self-conception and the role that a 'future self' played in people's actions and motivations. At its core, possible selves "represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would

like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 1986). Empiricists using possible self theory find that people’s imagined selves have a vast impact on their self-regulation and behavioral choices (Hoyle and Sherill, 2006; Pizzolato, 2006).

I particularly focus on two of the three possible selves that Markus and Nurius proposed, the hoped-for selves and the feared selves. The hoped-for self is the self that people aspire to become and is typically a positive image of who they want to be. The feared self, on the other hand, is the version of themselves that they want to avoid or are scared of becoming. The feared self can also be “the [state of] being apprehensive about being trapped in an undesired state such as poverty.” (Huerta, 2022; Oyserman and Markus, 1990). Both the hoped-for and feared self are connected because they represent two poles that can shape action and behavior simultaneously. I find that the feared self conceptualization is particularly useful as the students in this study carry marginalized identities and have firsthand exposure of the states they want to avoid. However, the hoped-for self helps them visualize new possibilities that they can then work toward. I utilize both conceptions of a ‘possible self’ as I construct three categories of higher education-related possible selves: the college self, the career self, and the familial self (which are further described in figure I). Ultimately, the goal is to understand how students’ varying conceptions of their possible selves impacts their decisions surrounding higher education as well as how they reflect the assemblage of a college-going habitus that is produced over the student’s life course.

Methods and Data Analysis

This paper presents findings from a year-long qualitative study with 14 seniors at Campana High School. The study consisted of two in-depth interviews with each student, conducted before (October-December 2021) and after (May-July 2022) they made their college

decisions. The semi-structured interviews, lasting 1-1.5 hours each, explored the students' educational histories, college application process, familial background, and knowledge of their parents' immigration. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for capturing changes in the students' decision-making processes as the college deadline approached. Data was supplemented by participant-observation and collection of personal statements from UC applicants, although these are not presented in this paper. Through a combination of interviews, participant-observation, and personal statements, this paper provides insight into the students' experiences and the environments in which they are situated. Each participant was given a \$25 gift card after the second interview.

To analyze the interview data, I transcribed it using Rev.com and Otter.AI and then hand-checked the accuracy. I employed NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to code the data. I conducted two rounds of coding: an initial inductive round where I identified relevant themes and patterns, and a second round that used a thematic codebook to delve deeper into specific categories. The iterative coding process revealed overall trends in the interviews and helped identify potential theories and frameworks that could explain the observed phenomena.

The Participants and Setting

The connection between immigrant familial histories and possible selves was studied by conducting a qualitative study at Campana High School, located in Southeast Los Angeles. With a 99% Latinx population, Campana's 41% foreign-born population and limited college resources, this Title I school serves as an ideal site to understand the impact of immigration histories on postsecondary decision-making. I recruited 14 high school seniors, who were applying to college (including community college and vocational schools), had at least one parent who immigrated from a Latin American country, and were seniors at Campana High. Participants were recruited

through outreach to the college counselor and teachers, as well as snowball sampling to ensure a diverse sample, including different achievement levels, family structures, genders, and college plans. Despite the homogeneity of the school, distinction in immigrant histories and other identities added diversity to the sample, with all participants being first-generation-to-college, low-income, and of Mexican or Central American origin.

Positionality Statement

Growing up as a first-generation, low-income daughter of Mexican immigrant parents in Southeast Los Angeles, I am familiar with the experiences and references shared by students during their interviews. Additionally, I have connected with Campana High for the past 6 years, helping multiple students with their college applications and participating in teacher-led college information sessions and panels. My background and familiarity with the community facilitated the study, as teachers were eager to help with recruiting and some students were familiar with me or my family. However, as a doctoral student at an elite university, I also have privileges that separate me from my participants, leading to a power dynamic. Despite this, I believe my insider-outsider status provides a comfortable space for students to share their experiences and the opportunity for them to redirect the interviews in ways that highlight their expertise and livelihoods.

RESULTS

I found that students' decision-making process was influenced by three distinct types of possible selves: the college possible self, the career possible self, and the familial possible self. These possible selves co-exist and shape the overall decision-making process, but not all versions may influence a specific decision. These possible selves are the most influential when explaining students' thinking, and categorizing them into these three domains helps understand how students consider various factors during the college decision-making process, beyond just academics.

Figure 1: Three Types of Higher Education Possible Selves

Type of Possible Self	Description	Characteristics
College Possible Self	The self that students hope to become during their college years. This can include what major they want to pursue, how close/distant from home they want to be, and what they hope to accomplish while in college.	Academic exploration; independence; location; diversity
Career Possible Self	The self that students envision after graduating from college. This can include what career they want to pursue as well as broader goals of upward mobility and financial stability.	Upward mobility; financial stability; career love/passion; career agency and autonomy
Familial Possible Self	The self that students hope to become in relation to their families. This can include their role within their current familial structure as well as envisioning future generations.	Giving back; maintaining the family; fulfilling familial aspirations; establishing upward mobility for future generations

College as More than Just an Academic Institution: The Influence of the Proximal College Self

College marks an educational and life transition period for most students in that they are progressing both to a new type of academic experience as well as a period of ‘facilitated adulthood (Montgomery and Cote, 2008). Although higher education serves a multitude of purposes, one of its resounding distinctions amongst youth is that it is a space of greater agency and independence while also still carrying resources and support that help adolescents move from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, it carries educational value; for many, higher education is the space where they begin honing on their academic interests and skills through a specialization (major), transition to more agentic course choices, and simultaneously explore

across disciplines and subjects. Thus, as high school students conceive of possible selves, the college self is one of the first that they establish as they make the decision about whether and where to pursue higher education.

The college possible self may also be the clearest link to decision-making; if a certain academic program or offering is important to the college possible self then it will undergird decision-making. For example, I interviewed April, who had a deep commitment to pursuing a fashion merchandising or design major. She was the only student in the sample considering a fashion for-profit school and although she knew some of the caveats of attending a for-profit school, she had narrower choices in the public universities Campana students typically applied to. However, April's affinity to fashion drove her to counter obstacles and open avenues for herself to learn more about how she could pursue a fashion merchandising degree:

At [Campana], it's sometimes hard to get information if you don't want to go into one of the popular majors. [Leslie: what would you consider to be 'popular' majors?]. Like biology, computer science, criminal justice, criminology, business, like that kind of stuff, which I don't really see myself doing. Or at school, it sometimes feels like they're feeding us to go into something in STEM, because they know that's gonna appeal to you because it makes money. You know, they treat it as that's going to have a guaranteed job for you. And I've gotten comments from people saying I'm not going to make money from my major. But like, that's what I want to do. That's what I'm passionate about and I know I'll find a way to use my major. Yes, the fashion industry is very competitive but like this is what I want to study in college.

April reveals the importance of considering post-college goals as students engage in college decision-making. She highlights how people drew concerns to career viability, which further reveals how proximal and distal futures interplay in college decision-making. In other words, a decision for the proximal college self can have implications for the more distal, career self. Nonetheless, April's commitment to her college self having access to an area of study she is passionate about reveals how it took precedence in her decision-making process and shapes her distal self as well. Although April bypasses the for-profit option and attend California State Polytechnic University-Pomona instead, her narrative depicts how condescension from educators and peers about her plans made it difficult to get support for her college possible self.

The college self was not entirely academically-tied either. College could help students achieve other short-term goals such as moving away from home or being in a location with more racial diversity. These non-academic desires were sometimes more important for students as they considered how college extends beyond the classroom. For Yori, the college possible self rested on having increased independence, which was of utmost importance as a queer student:

Well I was looking for a college that had my major and maybe my minor, Japanese language. But I also was looking for [a college] that was far away from home. Because I don't want to be in a toxic environment at home. So I at least want to be separate from my home. So I could at least have my own peace away from home... I think one purpose of college is becoming more independent so dorming away from home, that would be good for me.

Similarly, Jose also had interest in utilizing college as a stepping stone toward greater distance from home and independence. However, increased racial diversity of different college campuses and locations inspired his multi-state college application process:

Yeah I think when it comes to applying to like USC and NYU, I think like those schools are for sure more diverse and I was excited to apply to those because I wouldn't be like very used to it because I think Cal State LA is the same as [Campana] in a way, so I think applying to like NYU or USC, it really mattered in me applying to be able to see like a different group of people.

As both Jose and Yori demonstrate, the college self is one that has greater distance from home and shows the versatility of what college can represent for different students. Though both students did consider academics when choosing what institutions to apply to, they also reimagine higher education to be a space where they can fulfill something they do not currently have, such as independence or greater diversity. Thus, the valuation of these factors can be just as influential (if not more) as the academic identity of an institution. It helps explain why Jose opted against applying to the University of California system. It also assists us in understanding why Yori applied to different universities with distinct major selections as location was higher in her priorities.

However, the college possible self is not mutually exclusive from some of the other types of possible selves, like the familial or career selves. As Peter demonstrates through his thinking

of a variety of factors simultaneously, multiple possible selves can be fulfilled through his college decision-making process:

Mechatronics is for me, like I am the one who is deciding to be an engineer. And I want to be in Michigan, I really want to explore the nature and have actual winters. I really like the environment, and the weather is what I want. But maybe an issue of mine is that I have never thought of my future for myself. I thought of my future for my family, like 'oh you have helped me out so much so I want to go to college, I want to do this.' Like the only times I've thought for myself is like what I want to do, which is mechatronics. But the reason behind is more so to help out my family. Because I'm the youngest, my siblings dropped out of community college already. So I'm the last hope. So that's my personal sense of why I'm gonna go to college, because it gives me what I want to study and then also my objective of helping out my family.

What is special about the college decision-making process is that it has multiple facets of consideration: majors, locations, diversity, and more. Therefore, the college self can be split into accomplishing distinct goals despite making a single institutional decision. As Peter reveals, the variation in colleges helps him fulfill his academic passions (mechatronics), envision a career (engineering), and set him up to accomplish a familial responsibility (helping out his family as the 'last' one of his siblings to be able to pursue a college degree). Thus, the decisions that are made for the college self can have implications for other possible selves, but still influence how students go about making selections about their higher education trajectories during the application process.

On the Quest for Upward Mobility: Imagining the Career Possible Self

Career aspirations amongst adolescents are some of the most prominent drivers of possible selves (Cross and Markus 1991; Oyserman and Markus 1990; Pisarik and Shoffner 2009). Adolescence is treated as the life-stage where the emergence of adulthood and exit of childhood takes place, with labor and employment becoming a marker of that transition (Silva and Snellman, 2018; Tough, 2019). Though most of the study participants delay full labor market integration in favor of attending college first, career aspirations are still embedded in the higher education landscape through majors, internships and research opportunities, work-study, and more. Therefore, it is unsurprising that possible selves amongst the children of Latinx

immigrants revolves around career ambitions and thus undergirds their college decision-making process.

Some students had solidified career plans that guided their possible selves and decision-making. Alyssa, for instance, has known she wants to pursue a teaching career and her college list-making revolved around finding institutions that both had her desired major (French) and had opportunities to pursue teaching preparation and credentialing. As she states,

For the colleges I am considering, they have to have the major I want. And they have to have the different supplies and materials for students like me, who want to become teachers. Because when I see myself in like 10 or 20 years from now, I see myself already teaching. And I would actually like to come back to [Campana] and teach there because it's the school and community I'm comfortable with.

Alyssa's college decision-making revolved around her visualization of becoming a French teacher with a commitment to returning to Campana High to teach. Therefore, as she applied to California State Universities, she chose schools that 1) offered a French major, 2) had opportunities to either work toward teacher certification or would prepare her to pursue an M.A. in Education later on, and 3) were nearby so that she could continue being involved at Campana High. Evidently, the commitment to teaching was entrenched in giving higher education a purpose for Alyssa and guided her tangible school list making considerations.

The commitment to teaching, I found, was not only a pathway toward giving back to students but also derived from the desire of a middle-class profession with increased agency and autonomy. This stems from stories Alyssa's dad has shared with her about his own experiences as a working-class factory worker,

I've been raised with the idea of going to college because my parents would always tell me that going to college is, well maybe it's not my only option, but it's better for me instead of working in a factory like they have been. For example, my dad, he's always like 'you don't want to work in this, like me, you don't want to, you want to be the boss of your own self' instead of having a boss behind my back all the time. I feel like that's why I've been raised with that idea that college is basically the correct path for my future.

Knowledge about Alyssa's parents' stories and experiences give further insight into why she adheres to her possible self strongly. She both envisions her desired self through inspiration of her teachers but also her feared self: having to work in a low-agency, working-class environment. Thus, when we think about why career aspirations guide Alyssa's possible self so strongly, we see how the desired self and the feared self are linked to each other and guide her decision-making. Of course, Alyssa may enter college and have changes in majors and career aspirations, as many college students do. However, when we understand her college decision-making process at the application stage, then we can see how the visualization of possible self coupled with the avoidance of the feared self drives her motivations at selecting schools with her desired major and resources to help her accomplish her teaching goals.

Desires for upward mobility and jumping into the middle-class through higher education is not unique to the children of working-class immigrants. Low-income individuals generally have hopes that college can be the 'great equalizer' that gives them a chance at becoming upwardly mobile (Torche, 2011). Thus, the career-oriented self can translate to a wide array of students, especially given higher education becoming a greater need for higher-paying jobs (Rivera, 2015). However, I find that the career-oriented self amongst children of low-income, Latinx immigrants is deeply connected to the familial possible self, which gives students increased motivation and the need to achieve upward mobility. Upward mobility is seldom an individualized mission but rather a familial project.

Giving Back, Paying it Forward: The Power of the Intergenerational Familial Possible Self

Students' immigrant familial histories, ties, and trajectories are powerful motivators as students construct their possible selves. The past is interwoven with the present and motivates the future, both in positive and negative lines of thinking. Immigration scholars have highlighted

that the children of immigrants make sense of their identities often through their commitments and responsibilities to their families (Kao and Tienda, 1998; Louie, 2012; Smith, 2006).

Therefore, it is crucial we consider who students want to become in relation to their families because it may undergird how they conceive their educational futures. Put differently, the familial possible self may be tied to educational decision-making because higher education can be a stepping stone for the role students envision taking up in their immigrant families.

Students varied in their knowledge of their parents' immigration journeys; some knew very exact details while others broadly understood how and when their parents arrived at the United States. However, students conceived very well *why* their parents came to the United States and sometimes, even what their role as children of immigrants was in continuing that legacy. As Emily, the daughter of two working-class Salvadoran immigrants, articulates:

American Dreams are different for every person, like for some, the American Dream is to be owning a house with a white picket fence and a suburban area life where with Hispanic families, just having the kids succeed, having their kids go to a college, no matter if it's Cal State LA or Harvard, they're just happy I'm going to college. This makes them think that they did what they're supposed to do because they're able to do that; it feels good on themselves. And I think just because, from a child standpoint, you don't want to let your parents fail. So you're like 'Okay I have to do this' after all this because if I don't go, then they do fail.'

Emily's conceptualization of the American Dream as distinct for Latinx families like hers is crucial to understanding the role of immigration in her parents' aspirations. Her possible self is strongly tied to her conception of what her role is in her family's 'American Dream' and drives a positive construction of self that is guided by educational values and aspirations. Evidently, Emily contextualizes where her adherence to education came from and specifically, the role parental immigration plays in her meaning-making:

My mom came [to the United States] when she was 13. So my mindset has always been if my mom can come to a country by herself when she was 13, then I can do anything because it's not gonna be hard as that... my mom had my sister at 16 so like that's what she needed to take care of. She couldn't really think college-wise. And my dad, he didn't go to high school, he said he barely went to kindergarten [in El Salvador]. And so he wasn't really educated, so I knew I wanted to go to college because they didn't really have the opportunity to go but I have no excuse.

While her parents were unable to pursue a higher education, Emily still draws inspiration from their journeys to craft her educational pursuits. Interestingly, she also extrapolates that since her parents' journeys were difficult and were linked to not being able to pursue college, she then 'has no excuse' to not excel academically. In a way, Emily's possible self is educationally-driven and future-oriented precisely because her familial history could not be. Therefore, she conceptualizes her familial possible self to be the first in her family to pursue college and also later take on a greater financial role in her family.

In the construction of the familial possible self, the previous generation can be a powerful motivator as students conceptualize who they want to be in the future. Alice demonstrates that as she envisions who she wants to be, both as a student and as a family member, she draws inspiration from her dad's present and past:

Personally I want to go to college because I have seen my dad struggle working two jobs, earning minimum wage. We'll see each other like three hours or less everyday. I hardly see him ever since I started high school. So I feel like because he never got that opportunity to get a higher education, it's always been hard on him. That's why he's always wished for [me and my siblings] to get a better education. I feel like being Hispanic means coming here for a better opportunity. But I don't think it's just a better opportunity for them, for the ones who came, but for future generations as well... Seeing my dad struggle and sleep only like three hours a day, it's really shown me what one has to do to live with minimum wage. And I know he works really, really hard so that's what's shaped me to who I am now. I think that's why I'm always just in my books, studying. I'm always studying for everything, my tests, my quizzes, my APs. I'm always trying to get a higher education because of my dad.

Alice demonstrates the duality of the familial self as having both a hoped-for and a feared self. She wants to avoid working minimum wage jobs like her dad but simultaneously, respects that his sacrifices now enable her to pursue a better future. Thus, the past is connected with the present and histories are mobilized by the children of immigrants as they craft their own aspirations. What I find is that they are highly tied to familial possible selves cultivated by immigrant legacies¹ (Luqueño, forthcoming). Furthermore, there is also potent linkage between

¹ I coin the term 'immigrant legacies' in a different, forthcoming paper to describe how histories of immigration are passed down intergenerationally through cuentos (stories), dichos (sayings), and enseñanzas (teachings), and are

the college, career, and familial possible selves, demonstrating how they coexist and reinforce each other.

The familial possible self can also be intergenerational as students imagine themselves as contributing to their parents and ancestors but also as they envision their impact on future generations. As Jackie articulates, going to college can be a way of ‘paying back’ those before her while also setting an example for younger siblings and the next generation:

My purpose is to make my mom happy. Like of course, I want to be happy. But I also want to make her happy and proud because of how hard she has worked for me. And for my sisters too, being a single parent, and having to pay these high taxes in California, oh my God, it must be really hard for her. So for me, I want to be like my mom, I really look up to her. And if I ever have children, I want to be the mother that my mom was to me... My mom is happy with wherever I go, that's why I chose [CSU] Sacramento because it had the distance from home I wanted and a Criminal Justice major and my mom, she's just proud that I'll be the first in the family to go to college and be like a role model to my sisters.

Jackie demonstrates that the familial possible self is both a proximal and distal envisionment. In the short-term, going to college will make Jackie's mom happy and proud. But at the same time, pursuing a college degree can inspire her siblings and also set her up to give future generations a better starting point, with her mom as an inspiration. Additionally, college can be the vessel by which students can accomplish an array of goals, with Jackie demonstrating that she can pursue a major she is passionate about at a school she feels strongly about, while still being able to accomplish her number one goal of making her mom happy. The strong commitment to the family is a valuable asset that the children of immigrants can draw upon as they work toward their aspirations. Thus, the familial possible self gives students a strong predisposition to pursue higher education and can also guide their college and career possible selves in order to fulfill intergenerational goals.

DISCUSSION

embodied by the descendants of immigrants. Immigrant legacies are the afterlife of immigration and valuable in that the descendants of immigrants can draw from them as they make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their worlds (Luqueño, in preparation)

The children of Latinx immigrants possess a great deal of futuristic thinking and behavior. They understand their roles within their familial histories of immigration and that is incredibly empowering, as students show in their construction of possible selves. Despite the obstacles and challenges presented in applying to college as first-generation, working class students, their desired selves act like a North Star that helps them navigate through those hardships. Their possible selves also demonstrate the intersectionality of immigrant-origin identity as factors like socioeconomic class, first-generation status, gender, and ethnicity co-construct what the future may look like. It gives these students an additional affinity to upward mobility and career aspirations while encouraging them to make circumstances better for people like them.

As the students demonstrate, distinct possible selves are guides in the college decision-making processes. If we understand who students aspire to be and their prioritizations beyond *education* itself, we can parse out why they make the decisions that they do. The mindset and cognitive loads that students come into higher education decision-making with have vast effects on their choices, especially as they parse through information about the schools, finances, program offerings, and more. Therefore, we must not only be attuned to the impact of the social environment on students' college decision-making but also the role of imagined futures and purpose-construction that students implement as they grapple with different considerations. In other words, 'choice' is not just about the concrete pieces that colleges have to offer but also what the purpose of college even is for students and what factors should be prioritized.

Additionally, a main piece of college decision-making literature is assessing how students approach tangible college considerations based on the resources at their disposal (Iloh, 2018; McDonough, 1994; Perna, 2006). I do not dismiss that working-class, first-generation children

of immigrants face systematic hardship and oppression that limits how much of a ‘choice’ the college choice process actually possesses. Nevertheless, as the construction and power of the familial possible self reveals, students envision futures they align their behaviors to.

Additionally, the differing prioritization and presence of the college, career, and familial possible selves in decisions may help explain choices students make that may seem ‘irrational’ or ‘confusing.’ Because college decision-making work focuses on educational considerations, it may obscure the role of non-academic aspirations students ascribe to.

The contribution of this study is that we must rethink what meanings students attach to higher education and how we can elevate their multiple considerations in decision-making research. I find that children of Latinx immigrants’ unique ability to connect the past and present to their future possible selves is a resource they draw upon as they break cycles of poverty and hardship for their families. The power to pursue higher education thanks to the imagined familial possible self, increased need for the career self to maximize upward mobility opportunities, and alignment of the college self to multiple goals is what contributes to their increased higher education attachment. Even when parents have not attended college, the adherence to a better future gives students additional purpose to be ‘predisposed’ to higher education. However, conceptualizing compelling possible selves is only part of actualizing them. In order to best help children of Latinx immigrants get to and through postsecondary education, their assets need to be respected and cultivated by educators who can bridge the gap between dreams and reality.

Evidently, these histories can be very rich and fruitful when treated as an asset and therefore, educators can more powerfully draw upon them by incorporating families further into the college application process. Furthermore, providing humanizing spaces where students can talk about their concerns and worries about their possible selves in college access materials and

workshops can reconcile the separation between a process that asks for students' most polished selves and the realities students face. Welcoming students' full selves into the college application and decision-making process can ensure that educators are aware about the challenges and opportunities students encounter, which in turn, helps us better assist these students realize their possible selves.

For Internal Use Only

Bibliography

- Abrego, L. J. (2006). "I Can't Go to College Because I Don't Have Papers": Incorporation Patterns Of Latino Undocumented Youth. *Latino Studies*, 4(3), 212–231.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600200>
- Acevedo-Gil, N. (2017). College-Conocimiento: Toward an Interdisciplinary College Choice Framework for Latinx Students. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(6), 829-850.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2017.1343294>.
- Armstrong, E. A., & Hamilton, L. T. (2013). *Paying for the Party*. Harvard University Press.
- Baum, S., & Flores, S. M. (2011). Higher Education and Children in Immigrant Families. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 171-193.
- Carey, R. L. (2016). "Keep That in Mind... You're Gonna Go to College": Family Influence on the College Going Processes of Black and Latino High School Boys. *The Urban Review*.
- Carolan-Silva, A., & Reyes, J. R. (2013). Navigating the path to college: Latino students' social networks and access to college. *Educational Studies*, 49(4), 334-359.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2013.808199>
- Ceja, M. (2004). Chicana college aspirations and the role of parents: Developing educational resiliency. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3(October), 338-362.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192704268428>
- Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 52(5), 490-505. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1981837>
- Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2020). Income segregation and intergenerational mobility across colleges in the United States. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135(3), 1567-1633. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa005>

- Clayton, A. B., Medina, M. C., & Wiseman, A. M. (2019). Culture and community: Perspectives from first-year, first-generation-in-college Latino students. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 18(2), 134-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1386101>
- Contreras, F., & Contreras, G. J. (2015). Raising the bar for Hispanic serving institutions: An analysis of college completion and success rates. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 14(2), 151-170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192715572892>
- Cross, S., & Markus, H. (1991). Possible selves across the life span. *Human Development*, 34, 230-255. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000277058>
- Cuevas, S. (2021). *Apoyo sacrificial, sacrificial support: How undocumented Latinx parents get their children to college*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dache-Gerbino, A., Marquez Kiyama, J., & Sapp, V. T. (2018). The dangling carrot: Proprietary institutions and the mirage of college choice for Latina students. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(1), 29-60. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0033>
- Delgado, V. (2020a). Children of immigrants as 'brokers' in an era of exclusion. *Sociology Compass*, 14(10), 1-11.48(5), 718-742. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-016-0375-8>
- Feliciano, C. (2020). Immigrant Selectivity Effects on Health, Labor Market, and Educational Outcomes. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46(1), 315-334. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054639>
- Feliciano, C., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2005). *Gendered Paths: Educational and Occupational Expectations and Outcomes Among Adult Children of Immigrants*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1881913>

- Felix, E. R., & Fernandez Castro, M. (2018). Planning as Strategy for Improving Black and Latinx Student Equity: Lessons from Nine California Community Colleges. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(56). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1179266>
- Fernández-Kelly, P. (2008). The Back Pocket Map: Social Class and Cultural Capital as Transferable Assets in the Advancement of Second-Generation Immigrants. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 620(1), 116-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208322580>
- Gable, R. (2021). *The Hidden Curriculum: First Generation Students at Legacy Universities*. Princeton University Press.
- Gonzales, R. G. (2015). *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Gonzalez, L. M. (2015). Barriers to College Access for Latino/a Adolescents: A Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 14(4), 320-335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2015.1091315>
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying Student College Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers. *College and University*, 62(3), 207-221.
- Hoyle, R. H., & Sherrill, M. R. (2006). Future orientation in the self-system: Possible selves, self-regulation, and behavior. *Journal of Personality*, 74, 1673-1696. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2006.00424.x>
- Huerta, A. H. (2022). Accessing possible selves with limited college knowledge: Case studies of Latino boys in two urban continuation schools. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 66(10), 1342-1367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211054824>

- Ichou, M. (2014). Who they were there: Immigrants' educational selectivity and their children's educational attainment. *European Sociological Review*, 30(6), 750-765.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcu071>
- Iloh, C. (2018). Toward a new model of college 'choice' for a twenty-first-century context. *Harvard Educational Review*, 88(2), 227-244. <https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-88.2.227>
- Irizarry, J. G. (2012). Los caminos: Latino/a youth forging pathways in pursuit of higher education. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 11(3), 291-309.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192712446322>
- Jack, A. A. (2019). *The privileged poor: How elite colleges are failing disadvantaged students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kanno, Y., & Kangas, S. E. N. (2014). "I'm not going to be, like, for the AP": English language learners' limited access to advanced college-preparatory courses in high school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 848-878. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214544716>
- Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1998). Educational aspirations of minority youth. *American Journal of Education*, 106(3), 349-384.
- Keller, U., & Tillman, K. H. (2008). Post-secondary educational attainment of immigrant and native youth. *Social Forces*, 87(1), 121-152. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0104>
- Kiyama, J. M. (2010). College aspirations and limitations: The role of educational ideologies and funds of knowledge in Mexican American families. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(2), 330-356. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209357468>
- Leo, A. (2022). High expectations, cautionary tales, and familial obligations: The multiple effects of family on the educational aspirations of first-generation immigrant and refugee youth. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 53(1), 27-46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12407>

- Litten, L. H. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student college choice. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 53(4), 383-402.
- Luqueño, L.(Forthcoming). “Toward a Conceptualization of Immigrant Legacies: The Intertwined Nature of Parental Immigration and Higher Education Aspirations and Why It Matters”
- Mariscal, Janette. 2021. “The College Choice Process as a Latinx/a/o Family Affair.” In *Studying Latinx/a/o Students in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of Concepts, Theory, and Methodologies*, edited by Nichole M. Garcia, Cristobal Salinas Jr., and Jesus Cisneros, 30–42. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954-969.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954>
- McDonough, P. M. (1994). Buying and selling higher education: The social construction of the college applicant. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 65(4), 427-446.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1993.11778509>
- Montgomery, M., & Cote, J. (2008). College as a transition to adulthood. In J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence* (pp. 149-172).
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756607.ch8>
- Nava, P. E., & Lara, A. (2016). Reconceptualizing leadership in migrant communities: Latina/o parent leadership retreats as sites of community cultural wealth. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 10(3), 90-107.
- Núñez, A.-M., Rios-Aguilar, C., Kanno, Y., & Flores, S. M. (2016). English learners and their transition to postsecondary education. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook*

of Theory and Research (pp. 41-90). Springer International Publishing.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3_2

Núñez, A.-M., Sparks, P. J., & Hernández, E. A. (2011). Latino access to community colleges and Hispanic-serving institutions: A national study. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 10(1), 18-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192710391801>

Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. R. (1990). Possible selves and delinquency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(1), 112-125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.1.112>

Perna, L. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 21, pp. 99–157).

https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4512-3_3

Rivera, L. A. (2015). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton University Press.

Rosales, J. (2022). Latinx Undocumented Students College Choice. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2122972>

Sáenz, V. B., García-Louis, C., Drake, A. P., & Guida, T. (2018). Leveraging Their Family Capital: How Latino Males Successfully Navigate the Community College. *Community College Review*, 46(1), 40-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552117743567>

Salazar, C. (2021). ‘I Knew It Was Gonna Be Hard, but I Always Knew I Had Support From My Parents’: The Role of Family on Undocumented Students’ College Aspirations and Persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15210251211018826. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211018826>

Santiago, D., & Soliz, M. (2012). Ensuring America’s Future by Increasing Latino College Completion: Latino College Completion in 50 States. Executive Summary. *Excelencia in Education* (NJ1). *Excelencia in Education*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED532055>

- Smith, R. (2006). *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*. University of California Press.
- Teranishi, R. T., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. (2011). Immigrants in Community Colleges. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 153-169.
- Terriquez, Veronica. 2014. "Trapped in the Working Class? Prospects for the Intergenerational (Im)Mobility of Latino Youth." *Sociological Inquiry* 84 (3): 382–411.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12042>.
- Torche, F. (2011). Is a College Degree Still the Great Equalizer? Intergenerational Mobility across Levels of Schooling in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(3), 763-807. <https://doi.org/10.1086/661904>
- Warikoo, N. (2022). *Race at the Top: Asian Americans and Whites in Pursuit of the American Dream in Suburban Schools*. University of Chicago Press.

Appendix I: Table of Participants

- Highlighted universities indicate students receiving an acceptance to the institution
- Pseudonyms were chosen by the student to keep their identity confidential.
- All students identified as first-generation, low-income students.

Student	Identities	Colleges Applied To	Final School Selection
Peter	Male, Mexican-American, Single-Parent Household, Youngest of Four	CSU Channel Islands, CSU Chico, CSULA, University of Michigan, Michigan Tech, Michigan State, Johns Hopkins University	CSU Chico
Emily	Female, Salvadoran-American, Youngest of Two	CSULA, CSU Fullerton, CSU Northridge, CSULB, UCSD, UC Merced, UCLA, UCSB, Stanford, Harvard, Cornell, Columbia, NYU, USC	UC San Diego
Alice	Female, Mexican-American, Middle Child of 4, AVID	CSULA, CSUF, UCLA, UC Irvine	Rio Hondo College
Eduardo	Male, Mexican-American, Christian, Youngest of Two, AVID, College Bound	CSULA, CSUF, CSU Humboldt, CSULB, UCLA, Biola University, Cal Baptist University, Hope University, USC, Stanford	Mt. San Antonio College
Rose	Female, Mexican-American, Only Child, AVID	CSULB, CSUDH, CSUF, CSULA, UCLA, UC Riverside, UCSB	CSU Fullerton
Yori	Non-Binary/TransFem me, Mexican-American, LGBT+, Single-Mother Household, AVID	CSU Chico, CSU East Bay, CSU Fullerton, San Jose State, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA	CSU Fullerton

Jose	Male, LGBT+, Mexican-Honduran-American, Youngest of Four	CSULA, CSULB, San Francisco State, CSU Fullerton, NYU, USC, Fresno Pacific, Loyola Marymount University, Mount St. Mary's, Oregon State, Rochester Institute of Technology, Texas Tech, UT Austin, University of Utah, University of Oregon, University of La Verne, Arizona State University	CSU Fullerton
Jackie	Female, LGBT+, Mexican-American, Single-Mother Household, Oldest of Three, AVID	CSU Sacramento, CSU Fullerton, CSULA, Cal Poly Pomona	CSU Sacramento
Nicole	Female, Mexican-American, Youngest of Four	CSULB, CSUDH, Cal Poly Pomona, CSUF, UC Merced, UC Irvine, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, ELAC	CSU Fullerton
Jade	Female, Mexican-American, Youngest of Two, AVID	CSU Chico, CSU Fullerton, CSUDH, San Jose State	Cerritos College
Alejandra	Female, Mexican-American, Youngest of Two	CSUF, Cal Poly San Bernardino, CSUDH, UC Riverside, UCSD, UC Irvine, UC Berkeley	UC San Diego
Ashley	Female, Mexican-American, Single-Mother Household, Only Child	ELAC, UCLA, UC Irvine, UC Merced, UC Berkeley	East Los Angeles College
April	Female, Mexican-American, Youngest of Two, AVID	CSU Fresno, CSU Sacramento, San Francisco State, Cal Poly Pomona, Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising	CSU Poly Pomona

Alyssa	Female, Mexican-American, AVID	CSUDH, CSULA, CSU Fullerton, CSULB, UCLA, UC Riverside, UC Irvine, UCSB	CSU Los Angeles
--------	--------------------------------------	--	--------------------

For Internal Use Only