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Entering and Succeeding in the “Culture of College”: The Story of Two Mexican Heritage Students

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In this retrospective study, the academic resilience of two individuals of Mexican heritage who graduated from Stanford University is described. The respondents (a woman and a man) now in their early 20s came from home backgrounds of extreme impoverishment and adversity. By means of in-depth interviews the challenges the two respondents faced in school beginning in kindergarten and continuing through their graduation from Stanford is described. Both respondents attribute their academic success to the support given them by their mothers and their personal motivation to succeed in school; however, the authors show that this was also possible because the respondents acquired knowledge of the “culture of college” that is essential for the transition from high school to college. The authors describe the processes of this information transmission and how even though it changed the life of their respondents, it has not altered the life of their family.

Keywords: *educational resiliency; academic achievement; Latino students; family support; university students*

The theme of resiliency has gained considerable attention in recent years in the psychological and educational literature (e.g., Luthar, 2003; Masten, 2001; Taylor & Wang, 2000; Wang & Gordon, 1994). In the educational context, resiliency refers to students who despite economic, cultural, and social barriers still succeed at high levels. Research on resilient individuals has focused on the protective factors that contribute to the “invulnerability” that these students demonstrate (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997). Protective factors include personal resources (e.g., self-esteem, motivation) and external resources (e.g., supportive family members, mentors, tutoring programs). In recent years, interest in child and adolescent development has begun to include ways in which healthy communities facilitate positive and resilient

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development, including school success (e.g., Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

Much of the literature on Latino students has concentrated on their poor school achievement. The reasons for this underachievement have been attributed to such obstacles as low proficiency in English, immigrant parents with little knowledge of the educational system in this country, mismatch between the culture of the home and the school, few Latino role models and mentors, and institutional practices (e.g., academic tracking) that contribute to the low school performance of Latino students (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Despite these obstacles, there are many Latino students who succeed in school. Researchers have begun to study these resilient students with the goal of better understanding why some Latino students excel academically, whereas others from similar homes and/or communities do not (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Gandara, 1995; Waxman, Huang, & Padron, 1997).

In an earlier study, Arellano and Padilla (1996) reported on 30 Stanford University students of Mexican heritage. These students were evenly divided into three groups ($N = 10$) by the educational level of their parents: those whose most highly educated parent had attained 0 to 11 years of education, those with at least one parent who was a high school graduate, and those who had at least one parent who was a college graduate. The findings showed that for those students whose parents had the least education, role models and mentors were particularly important because they provided the students with the resources and information necessary to take challenging classes in high school and to consider applying to a university such as Stanford. In addition, informants indicated that pride in their Latino culture was extremely important to them, and they saw this as part of what contributed to their success in school. More important, students also credited their parents with supporting and encouraging them in their educational pursuits even though their parents had little formal schooling. Finally, all students possessed a strong sense of self, coupled with an optimistic view of their ability to succeed and the persistence and drive to make it happen. Despite their academic success extending, in most cases, back to elementary school, many respondents reported experiencing both overt and subtle racism in school. Arellano and Padilla concluded with a call for additional studies of highly successful university students.

The goal of this study was to examine in closer detail the life experiences of two students of Mexican heritage who overcame difficult, but different, barriers and who gained admission to Stanford University. An additional purpose was to report on how these two individuals learned to enter into the "culture of college" that often is taken for granted among the middle class but that is a formidable barrier for students from immigrant families and parents with

little social capital. By the “culture of college,” we mean the knowledge that many middle-class parents possess and that they use to guide their children toward a college education. This knowledge includes such things as college preparatory classes in middle and high school, the importance of extracurricular activities, preparation for the Scholastic Achievement Tests (SATS) required for admission by many colleges, the college application process itself, and scholarships and other ways of obtaining financial assistance if necessary. Access to the culture of college is often taken for granted by middle-class families and schools that serve primarily middle-class students. However, access to the prerequisite knowledge for college often poses a major challenge for students from lower socioeconomic class families.

This is a retrospective and qualitative study designed to understand how home, school, peers, and community contexts supported the high academic attainment of two students from extremely adverse and impoverished home backgrounds. In earlier studies, the process leading to academic success has been neglected in favor of a static view of the factors contributing to the resiliency manifested in students from families that do not possess access to the culture of college. In this retrospective study, our goal was to show that maintaining a sense of resiliency for students from the most impoverished homes is a struggle that begins before kindergarten and that continues through graduation from the university. The two individuals selected for this study, both graduates of Stanford University, show that challenges to success are present well beyond the early years of school where most research is concentrated.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two Mexican heritage Stanford University students (one woman and one man) served as the informants for this study. To determine if the informants met the criteria for academic resiliency, 30-minute informal interviews were conducted to assess the obstacles each overcame in terms of immigration, race, social class, and perceived discrimination. After the preliminary interviews, it was apparent that both informants met our criteria for academic resiliency. After this stage was completed, semistructured interviews were carried out with both informants to gain a better understanding of their respective home, school, and community contexts, as well as the strategies they used to overcome adversity and be successful students.

The interviews initially consisted of a series of predetermined questions to gauge each informant’s personal history. The topics included the following:

- The role of immigration in the informant's development
- The role of the mother in the informant's development
- The role of the father in the informant's development
- High school experiences and college preparation
- Involvement in tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs
- College advising, selection, and admission
- College life and adjusting to new environments

These topics provided the overall framework for the semistructured interviews and were organized to establish the sequence of events that culminated in the informants' Stanford experiences. However, the semistructured format allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to probe deeper for specific information deemed relevant to academic resilience.

The interviews each lasted approximately 2 hours each and took place at a location of the informant's choosing (the off-campus housing for the male respondent and a dining hall for the female respondent). Interviews with the male informant were audiotaped, and detailed notes were taken. The female informant requested that audiotaping not be done, and so documentation of her interviews was exclusively based on detailed notes taken during the interview.

After completing the two primary interviews, information from each respondent was organized thematically to prepare for follow-up interviews. For example, areas such as ethnic identity were not covered in-depth during the initial interviews, even though it became apparent this was a key feature to the development of both informants. Therefore, ethnic identity and details regarding family histories that needed more exploration constituted the themes for the next interview. The follow-up interviews took place in the same location as the first interview and lasted between 70 and 90 minutes. If questions still remained unanswered, the first author contacted the informant to clarify a question or to provide additional information to a particular question.

Names and identifying features (e.g., hometown or school name) were changed to protect the confidentiality of informants. Using suggestions from each informant, the pseudonyms of Erandi for the female informant and Juan for the male informant are used here.

Erandi is the older of two daughters and grew up in a semirural community. Juan is the oldest of four children and grew up in a low-income and high-minority, largely Latino and African American, community.

At the time interviews were completed, Erandi was 21 years old and Juan was 22. Erandi was enrolled as an undergraduate student during the inter-

viewing period. She has since graduated from Stanford with a major in political science and is working on the East Coast. She plans to enter a doctoral program in the next year or two. Juan also graduated from Stanford, with a degree in international relations. He is currently employed for a national organization in the field of higher education and lives in northern California.

Major Findings

Border Crossing

An important characteristic of both students was their strong connection to their Mexican heritage, and this includes the experiences both had crossing the U.S./Mexico border. Erandi crossed when she was only 4 years old. With her single mother and younger sister, aided by a paid smuggler [*coyote*], traveling at night, hiding in bushes, and battling the cold, Erandi made it to the United States. Juan, on the other hand, was born in the United States; however, both of his parents were undocumented aliens. Juan still remembers when his grandmother in Mexico fell ill, the family went to visit her. Juan recalls how entering Mexico was no problem, but returning was another matter.

Juan and his younger sister could have crossed into the United States without any difficulty because they are both American citizens. However, they refused to let their parents hire a *coyote* and cross without them. Thus, Juan remembers with great detail his reentry into the United States. The family crawled in bushes to keep hidden while also enduring extreme nighttime cold. Juan recalls how his poncho was his only protection from the cold. The entire family crossed safely into California and made their way home. At the time, Juan was only 10 years old.

Both Erandi and Juan use this border-crossing experience as a guidepost for defining their ethnic identity. Both identify very strongly with their Mexican heritage, and they both state that they have felt unwanted in this country. This feeling of marginalization took root with their border crossing, and it continues today with their perception of racism in their respective communities (e.g., racial profiling by the police) and recent public policies that have had negative consequences for immigrants, such as California Propositions 187 and 227. Proposition 187 was designed to restrict illegal immigrants of welfare benefits, education, and all but emergency medical care. It also required teachers to report any knowledge of illegal immigrants to the Office of Immigration and Naturalization Services for purposes of deportation. Proposition 227 took aim at non-English language instruction in schools and

eliminated most bilingual education programs in California. Thus, it is no wonder that both Erandi and Juan felt even more marginalized when confronted by anti-immigrant sentiment that has gained a foothold in California.

Acquiring Proficiency in English

Both Erandi and Juan come from monolingual, Spanish-speaking homes. Consequently, both learned English in school and by listening to English television. Erandi began kindergarten in an English-immersion classroom in southern Washington State. Her mother, a migrant farm laborer at the time, had moved her children to Washington in order to find work in the apple orchards. Erandi still recalls how intimidating school was because she understood so little English. Her classmates made fun of her, and this additional stress made it more difficult for her to learn English. She remembers:

One day we were supposed to bring in something for *sharing* time. My ears, not used to hearing the English language, heard *cherries*. Despite my mother's confusion, she bought me a bag of cherries for school. My classmates laughed, and I was, needless to say, very embarrassed.

After kindergarten, Erandi's mother returned to California and Erandi entered first grade. This change in schools was a blessing for Erandi because the class was bilingual, the teacher was Latina, and about half of the instruction was in Spanish despite the presence of many White, English-speaking students. The American parents did not object to the arrangement because their children acquired Spanish while the Spanish speakers acquired English. For Erandi, it was an ideal situation because the teacher pushed her to learn English, but there was always the safety net of Spanish to fall back on.

Juan's story is different. He began learning English at about 4 years of age by watching Sesame Street. The games with letters, sounds, and words that Juan heard enabled him to learn the rudiments of English. When Juan entered school, all of his classmates were either other Latinos or African Americans. Juan did not experience the teasing that Erandi did because most of his peers spoke either Ebonics (i.e., African American Vernacular English) or Spanglish (i.e., a combination of Spanish and English). Thus, everyone spoke with a nonstandard variety of English, and little linguistic teasing occurred. This made Juan's acquisition of English easier. Although he remembers speaking English in grade school with a heavy Spanish accent, Juan was able to acquire English without fear of ridicule because as he recalled, everyone was in the same "English language learning" boat.

Childhood Translation

Like many children from non-English homes, both Erandi and Juan acquired English rapidly, whereas their parents struggled with the language. Thus, their parents relied on them to serve as translators. Erandi willingly helped her mother, but in addition, she translated for other adults in her community who were adopted “uncles.” She loved all of them and undertook this job willingly. Today, however, she feels this was a lot of pressure to place on a young child because she recalls not always understanding the context in which she was asked to translate (e.g., a landlord-tenant dispute). Erandi feels that this forced her to grow up a little before her time because she spent a large portion of her childhood learning to make sense of rental contracts and other legal documents. However, through this experience, Erandi states that she learned to be more self-sufficient and responsible.

Occasionally, Erandi used translation situations to her advantage. For example, she frequently translated for her mother at parent-teacher conferences. She related one incident when her teacher was very upset at her constant acting up in class. Somewhere during the translation, a great deal of the teacher’s frustrations was lost because of Erandi’s deliberate effort during translation to lessen the teacher’s complaints against her. Erandi did not make a regular habit of deliberately skewing the translation, but having this power enhanced her sense of self-efficacy.

Juan also recalls translating for his mother, but not for his father because his father worked long hours and could manage with English. Juan had many of the same experiences translating as did Erandi and did not always feel comfortable or competent in this role. He vividly remembers: “My mother was pregnant with my sister, and I had to translate the doctor’s diagnosis when I did not have an understanding of the words he was using. I just happened to guess the proper translation of *hormone*.” Juan still remembers how even though he did not know how babies were conceived, he had the task of translating this medical information to his mother.

Although a great deal of stress was placed on these young translators, both informants appreciated the worldly experiences this gave them. Even though it was often difficult, they both learned skills that helped them become independent young adults. Whereas their friends were concerned with the latest developments in G. I. Joe or Barbie, Erandi and Juan were learning about contract negotiation and medicine while concurrently enriching their abilities in two languages. They were forced to grow up before some of their peers, but they also received many social and cognitive benefits because of their role as linguistic brokers for the adults in their family (Buriel, Perez, De

Ment, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Tse, 1995; Weisskirch & Alatorre Alva, 2002).

Role of the Mother

During interviews, both Juan and Erandi emphasized how their mothers contributed to their academic development. Erandi said, "My strength comes from my mother. Everything else is a supplement." Even though Juan's father was physically present, unlike Erandi's, he maintains that his mother was also the foundation for his academic success.

Both informants understood that their mothers were limited in terms of their abilities to help with their homework. Erandi's mother never attended high school, but she motivated her daughter to work hard in school both explicitly and implicitly. From a young age, Erandi and her sister frequently went to the fields with their mother and played while the mother worked the entire day picking one crop or another in the blazing sun. This experience motivated Erandi to work hard in school because she understood from an early age that the consequence of not being educated limited a person's choice of work, and she was determined not to spend her life as an agricultural worker.

Erandi's mother was also a direct force in her daughter's education. She constantly monitored Erandi's homework to make sure it was complete. When Erandi finished her homework, her mother created more academic work for her to complete, such as penmanship exercises. If Erandi did not do her schoolwork, her mother would spank her. Today, Erandi feels that her mother's actions were proper because if her mother had not been tough on her, she could easily have ended up picking in the fields or on the street and pregnant like so many of her high school classmates.

Juan's mother was also a driving force behind his education. She, like Erandi's mother, was limited in how she could help Juan; nonetheless, she constantly checked with him to see both the homework he had to do and whether he had completed it. She constantly stressed the importance of a good education.

The constant monitoring had one common beneficial effect on Juan and Erandi; over time, both internalized the need to do their schoolwork without being told by their mothers. Thus, by the time they entered high school, they knew the importance of homework. They also knew by this time who at school to seek out for help with their work because their mothers could not assist them.

Role of the Father

The very proactive role of Juan's mother in his academic success overshadows the importance he attributes to his father. Although Juan's mother held a job to help support her family, his father sometimes worked in excess of 18 hours a day, and this had a dramatic affect on Juan in several ways. First, through his father's earnings, there was economic stability in the home. Even though the family was poor, their situation could have been a great deal worse.

Second, Juan's father was the enforcer in the family. His mother made the rules, but it was his father's belt that flew when Juan stepped out of line. This motivation through fear helped keep Juan on the right track given the negative influences of both the people in his neighborhood and his peers in high school. So what could be construed as physical abuse in the larger American societal context in fact served to keep Juan motivated in his schoolwork and away from peers who might have gotten him into trouble.

Finally, Juan's father helped motivate him to succeed in education by showing his son the negative effects of not having an education. Juan's father only completed the third grade, and he has had to do physically taxing work for long hours for low pay to support his family. Juan knew that this was not the life for him. Furthermore, Juan felt that if he could get an education, he could eventually help his parents financially. In this way, Juan's father played an integral, but indirect, role in his son's academic success. The father's positive example of hard work combined with a steady income served to stabilize the family and provided the ambiance necessary for Juan's success in school.

The story is significantly different for Erandi. She never knew her father because he abandoned her mother before Erandi was born. Erandi's mother raised her children as a single mother until Erandi was 7 and her mother started a relationship with a man who became Erandi's stepfather. This new man in her life filled the opposite role of Juan's father. He brought patriarchy and chaos to Erandi's previously all-female household. His salary provided some financial stability; however, his physical abuse of her mother and excessive drinking countered the economic stability. On one occasion, Erandi called the police when the stepfather, in a drunken rage, was beating her mother.

The patriarchy of the mother's partner was a definite negative experience for Erandi because he constantly belittled her intelligence and said she would never amount to anything. Erandi was able to overcome this by surrounding herself with supportive tutors and counselors who told her she was a person of worth. However, these experiences led Erandi to state emphatically that

she would never be dependent on a man, and she came to see education as the ticket to her independence. Thus, whereas Juan's father motivated him through positive role modeling, Erandi's stepfather had the opposite effect on her.

High School Experiences

High school was very different for both informants. Erandi went to the local, public high school, whereas Juan received a full scholarship at the end of his middle school years to attend a private school that was about a 1-hour bus ride from his home. Although the experiences of the two informants were vastly different, they both highlight the need for academic support. Granted, both informants were highly motivated academically, but neither would have been able to succeed without the assistance they received from nonfamilial sources.

For Erandi, this support came in the form of her extracurricular activities. She became involved in both the Upward Bound and AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) programs at her school. Through AVID, she received supplemental instruction 2 days per week as well as in-class writing 3 days per week. Upward Bound added to Erandi's experience during the summer months because in this program students lived at the local college and took classes from college students who also served as role models. These programs also contributed to Erandi's ethnic identity because most of her tutors and instructors were Chicano college students, many from similar circumstances as her own. These college students played a vital role for Erandi and her fellow high school students because they were positive Chicano role models while also providing preparatory college academic and counseling support. Although Erandi was motivated in school, she did not realize at the time that her involvement in these activities began her entry into the culture of college because she was receiving access to information and experiences that her mother could not provide her.

Erandi also became very active within her high school MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) organization. Although this organization did not directly contribute to her academic achievement, it did give her a leadership role in her high school. It is well known that extracurricular activities contribute positively to students' feelings of connectedness to school and to higher academic achievement (Brown & Evans, 2002; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999), and this was certainly true in Erandi's case. Her involvement with MEChA gave her confidence in her identity and leadership skills. She also feels that this involvement contributed to her academic

achievement. Erandi did not receive the same support in the classroom. Erandi's high school teachers continually labeled her a "troublemaker" because she was outspoken on ethnic and community issues that she felt passionate about.

Erandi attributes her intellectual development primarily to the assistance she received from her AVID and Upward Bound instructors. Erandi's mother still supported her academic pursuits, but she was unable to guide her with information about precollege courses, SAT exams, or the college application process.

Juan, on the other hand, attended a prestigious private school in an upper-class neighborhood. A recruiter for the school read an article in a local newspaper about Juan being the valedictorian at his middle school graduation. The recruiter contacted Juan and arranged to meet with him. After a conversation, the recruiter offered Juan a full scholarship to the private high school he represented, contingent on Juan's passing a series of entrance exams. Juan successfully passed the tests and earned a scholarship valued at \$13,000 per year, far in excess of anything his parents could have afforded. Initially, Juan's parents were not easily convinced that this private school was in his best interests. When they finally agreed, Juan went from the local high school (affectionately known as "Jailmont" or "Crackmont") to one of the best high schools in the area.

Juan was isolated during his entire 4 years in high school because he was one of only a handful of Latino students at the school. Being on scholarship, Juan did not have the same financial means as his peers, and he mostly stayed to himself. Given the vast resources of his high school and its students, there were no such programs as AVID or Upward Bound. Juan did have high-quality instruction, after-school tutors, some college counseling, and the prestigious name of his high school.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is an integral aspect of the high school experience. Erandi stated that at times, peer pressure pulled her away from AVID and Upward Bound. Even though these programs reinforced her desire to excel academically while concurrently creating a positive ethnic identity, many of her friends would have preferred that she hang out on the streets with them. Relying on the strength she derived from her mother's numerous sacrifices, Erandi made a difficult decision and chose the academically oriented programs over her friends. Erandi feels that she made the correct decision, but at the time, she lost many friends. Ironically, as more and more people joined

AVID and Upward Bound, peer pressure shifted in Erandi's favor, and some of her former friends caved into this new peer pressure and joined the after-school programs.

Whereas Erandi's success is clearly due to a college-oriented support system offered by her mentors and like-minded peers, Juan's situation was quite different. Many of the students at his high school were into drugs and cutting class. Although these behaviors are not unique to high schools, Juan felt that the situation was excessive. His fellow students came from extraordinarily wealthy families, and they had money to buy heroin, cocaine, speed, and marijuana. Juan said that it was not uncommon to enter the bathroom between classes to find people smoking marijuana or occasionally shooting up.

With the early 1990s' rise of "Gangsta' Rap," there also came increased interest in Juan as a symbol of a dangerous, glorified street life. Juan's classmates would tease, "Don't mess with Juan. He's from the ghetto and he'll kick your ass." He was constantly asked if he would sell his classmates drugs because of his assumed hometown connections. Juan did not associate with his peers in after-school activities because he frequently had to work during high school to help the family meet their financial obligations. At times, the family's economic resources were so limited that to make ends meet, his parents would rent out space in the family home to people who were new in the community or had nowhere else to go. Juan recalls one period when there were approximately 20 people in addition to his family living in a modest house, whereas many of his peers lived in very large homes with multiple spare bedrooms. Juan did not understand drug use as a status symbol because he knew from firsthand experiences in his community how drug use could destroy a person's life. The economic barrier between Juan and his classmates made it easier for him to avoid peer pressure.

College Preparation, Selection, and Application

As mentioned earlier, Erandi learned about college opportunities from her counselors and tutors in her after-school programs. Erandi learned early to surround herself with mentors who tutored her, stressed the value of a college education, and also came from similar ethnic backgrounds. This served Erandi well because her mother was unable to help with information about college due to her lack of formal education. Erandi's mother did not complete eighth grade, and she held the belief that if Erandi graduated from high school, this in itself would lead to financial success. Thus, the mentoring Erandi received from her counselors and tutors proved invaluable because a college-type culture was not evident in the rural high school she attended.

Juan did not have the benefit of the mentoring that Erandi enjoyed. One of the selling points of his elite, private high school was the number of alumni attending prestigious universities such as Harvard or Stanford. Ironically, the school was weak in college counseling because it was assumed that parents could and would provide such assistance to their children.

Juan's parents, like Erandi's mother, did not graduate from high school, and although they supported his academic pursuits, they lacked information about higher education and what was required for admission. Fortunately, Juan's school was filled with a culture-of-college atmosphere. Most of Juan's classmates knew the requirements for college admission and, for example, were spending hundreds of dollars taking SAT prep classes to increase their scores. For the few students who did not have the benefit of parental guidance, they learned from their more fortunate peers. Thus, Juan was familiar with some information about college admissions because of his peers.

Juan related how his guidance counselor asked him if he was going to take the SAT. After explaining to Juan that the SAT was part of the college application process, he signed up for the final test date. Juan admits that without at least the little advice that he received from his counselor, there was no way he could have gained acceptance to Stanford. Although Juan's college counseling was scarce, when it was present, it proved invaluable.

How both students went about deciding which universities to apply to is interesting. With Stanford's low acceptance rate even among highly qualified applicants, few students feel confident that they are going to gain acceptance to Stanford, and Erandi and Juan were no different. However, they did differ in a few key respects.

When it came time to complete college applications, fee waivers played an integral role in facilitating the process because their families could not afford the application fee. In addition, both informants felt that there was little risk involved in applying to Stanford. In a worst-case scenario, if they were rejected, they felt that they would not have wasted their time in applying because they envisioned a low probability of gaining admission to Stanford. Erandi did spend some time on SAT test preparation during her time in AVID and Upward Bound, but it did not come close to the intensity and depth of a Kaplan or Princeton Review course. Thus, the possibility of gaining acceptance to a university such as Stanford was more a dream than a real possibility. Furthermore, Juan had decided beforehand that if he was not admitted to Stanford, his backup plan was going to be to join the army.

Juan knew the Stanford campus well because he lived in a community near Stanford, and he had spent several summers working in the Stanford dining halls. For people in his family and community, Stanford represented a place of employment, but never a place to go to college. To them, it was like a

country club reserved for wealthy white people. A Chicano from the *barrio* could never make it to Stanford, and many people told Juan this along the way.

Both Juan and Erandi worked hard on their applications, but each reacted differently to their respective acceptance to Stanford. There was no question in Juan's mind where he would go to school because Stanford was almost in his "backyard," and he wouldn't have to concern his parents about being far from home. He spent the time after his acceptance engulfed in a sea of disbelief by his classmates. Sons and daughters of multimillionaires were rejected from Stanford, and somehow Juan gained acceptance. Thus, Juan felt that his goal of using the elite private high school as a means of upward mobility was accomplished.

Erandi's situation was different because Stanford was several hundred miles from her home, and her decision to attend evolved more slowly. Initially, she favored a nearby University of California campus where she could be with her friends and closer to her family. Erandi's family saw the University of California as having greater stability for her because she would be with peers and mentors who had supported her throughout high school. Stanford, on the other hand, seemed more uncertain, and she wasn't sure whether she could be happy at such a school. However, her friends impressed on her the great opportunity open to her if she attended Stanford, and the choice seemed clear to them—attend Stanford! Her mentors and friends refused to allow Erandi to squander the opportunity; she had to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime situation to further her education.

Life at Stanford

The transition to college was difficult for both Erandi and Juan. Even though Stanford prides itself on its diversity, there are still few students who come from backgrounds similar to Erandi and Juan. Both lived in Stanford's Chicano theme residence hall during their freshman year, and this helped ease the transition to college.

Juan was initially impressed with his theme house. While in high school, he felt out of place in his neighborhood because of the school he attended and the fact that he was a high-achieving, low-income Chicano student. However, at Stanford, there were more people like him that he could identify with. He finally had a group (albeit small in numbers) that he could affiliate with. Although not all students in the theme house understood Juan or his background, at least there were students who he could share experiences with; this situation was different from what he had known in high school.

Adjusting to classes at Stanford was another struggle that reminded Juan of his adjustment to high school. He had difficulty with some of his classes, and he was not accustomed to the workload. He had to learn new study skills and become even more disciplined than ever before. Again, the strength and motivation Juan derived from his family helped him persevere. Essentially, Juan knew that taking the time to really understand a required reading or to write a quality paper was infinitely easier than performing manual labor for 16 hours a day.

Outside his residence hall, Juan found a world more like that he experienced in high school. First, Juan did not see much diversity on the campus. In addition, he found that many students held what he felt were ignorant views on immigrant rights and affirmative action, two areas of great personal interest to Juan. Moreover, Juan often felt marginalized from the main student body and decided after his freshman year that he would be more comfortable living at home and commuting to campus.

Juan also had a number of unnerving encounters with the Stanford Police Department. He maintained his urban style of dress, combing his hair back, wearing baggy jeans and oversized shirts. Many times, the police correctly assumed that he was from one of Stanford's neighboring barrios, but they were incorrect in assuming that Juan could not be a Stanford student. Many times, the police stopped Juan for no reason. This added to his feeling of marginalization, and although this did not lessen his determination to complete his education at Stanford, it did increase his sense of alienation from the university community.

Erandi did not have Juan's safety net, because her home was too far away. Initially, she also enjoyed the theme residence experience. She was accustomed to being in an academic environment with other Chicanos, so the availability of a theme house eased her transition into the Stanford student community. However, she soon discovered that many students in her residence hall were not politically active or even politically conscious. Erandi's identity centered on the struggle of Chicanos everywhere, and she could not understand how so many of her friends could be apathetic when they had a personal stake in the issues she was interested in. As a consequence, Erandi faced a great deal of personal criticism because of her political activism, especially on behalf of agricultural workers.

What these students did not understand was that their theoretical discussions of civil rights and immigration policy had a different meaning for Erandi. For example, when people discussed immigrant rights, this was not theory to her because she had crossed the border illegally. Also when people talked about pesticides and farm workers, her mother was a farmworker, and

Erandi had firsthand experience with pesticides in the fields. Fortunately, Erandi did find the support she needed at the Chicano and Latino student service center and among fellow MEChA members. Here she was able to work on social issues and surround herself with people who shared her interests in improved living and working conditions for Latino immigrants.

At times, Erandi considered transferring to a University of California campus where she could be around more politically minded people as well as her friends from home. Interestingly, it was these same friends who insisted that she remain at Stanford. They understood the struggles that she was facing, and they understood two other key issues. First, many of the same concerns that Erandi was experiencing were also common on University of California campuses. Just because there were more politically active Chicano students at Berkeley did not mean that it was any easier to coexist with unsympathetic peers. Erandi's friends also told her that because of Stanford's reputation and resources as a research university, she had to take advantage of the opportunities available to her. In the end, Erandi's friends again prevailed, and she remained at Stanford until she graduated.

Even though both Erandi and Juan felt estranged from the general student population, they were able to accommodate and succeed. For Erandi, she found support at the Chicano and Latino student services center and with her fellow MEChA students and continued to maintain ties to her high school support network. On the other hand, Juan made a few friends at Stanford, but at the end of the day, he was able to return home. Both students demonstrated a high level of intrinsic motivation to succeed and the persistence necessary to face challenges throughout their schooling. Furthermore, both individuals also showed that each in their own way needed the support of their family and a network of friends and mentors to succeed.

Discussion

These two case studies demonstrate that adversity is not a reason for failure. However, the life course perspective taken in this study demonstrates that entering into the culture of college is extremely difficult for students who come from home backgrounds similar to those of our two informants. Both Erandi and Juan, who come from extremely adverse circumstances, did succeed academically, but they had to overcome multiple challenges that came in many different forms in order to persevere and succeed. Their struggles included poverty, learning English, lack of peer support, racism, and feelings of alienation.

Even after proving their academic ability and gaining entrance into Stanford University, Erandi and Juan continued to struggle with social and institutional barriers. Each coped with these barriers in different ways and graduated from Stanford. Yet their struggle is not over. Even with a Stanford education, both still have families in poverty, and they still confront racism; classism; and, for Erandi, sexism.

The two individuals whose stories are reported here, in their respective ways, took advantage of social networks to enter into the culture of college and used familial support to keep themselves grounded in their values and culture. In addition, they possessed a high level of intrinsic motivation to succeed and a strong sense of their ability to overcome any challenge that would present itself. They saw their mothers as the key to their success but also realized that knowledge of how higher education works for the socially advantaged was also critical and sought out ways to obtain such knowledge. Fortunately, their mothers supported them in their individual quest for entry into the culture of college that was necessary to go beyond the resources of the family.

Although we recognize that it is not possible to generalize our findings from our two cases to all Latino students, we believe that Latino students, like Erandi and Juan, can be successful in school. Some readers might argue that Erandi and Juan were the fortunate ones and that their success is atypical. We take the position, however, that Erandi and Juan succeeded only because they managed to learn what the middle class take for granted, that is, that there is class- and culture-bound knowledge that is necessary to succeed in higher education (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Lopez, 1995). In other words, a parent's aspiration for his or her son or daughter to get a college education is not sufficient. For example, Erandi's mother supported her with every ounce of her energy, but she lacked the required knowledge of how the system works. Although support is a very necessary component of each informant's success, it was only when this support was coupled with knowledge of the system that Erandi and Juan were able to achieve as much as they did. Without it, there is a good chance that Erandi would have only graduated from high school (what her mother thought was an appropriate level of education), and Juan would have joined the army.

In conclusion, we have tried to show that the route to higher education is not easy for our most "in-need" students. Furthermore, even when highly successful Latino students do make it to the university, the challenges do not disappear. Fortunately, Erandi and Juan had learned strategies for coping with the ever-present challenges in their life. For those of us interested in assisting Latino students to succeed, we need to recognize that the assistance

students need begins very early in life and continues for a very long time. The needs of students change over time, and there will always be some things that their advocates cannot always do something about such as overt and covert forms of racism, but resilient forms of behaviors can be learned and sustained when families, schools, and communities unite to enable children to succeed (e.g., Benson et al., 1998).

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