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Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions

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Validating Students: A Conceptualization and Overview of Its Impact on Student Experiences and Outcomes

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Fostering a Therapeutic Learning Environment: Highline Community College

Rolita Flores Ezeonu



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**Student Access,
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Student Access, Finance, and Success in Higher Education

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A Special Note from the Editors

TG and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln are pleased to present this special issue of *Enrollment Management Journal*. We hope you will find the contents—compiled and edited by Laura I. Rendón and Susana M. Muñoz—especially timely and insightful given the ever-increasing focus on degree completion. Because of Dr. Rendón’s contributions to the development of validation theory, the final article of the Scholarship and Research section relates her biographical background and insights into the development of her work.

From the Guest Editors

Prior to President Barack Obama's administration, the nation's educational system had been concerned primarily with preparing students to gain access to college. Yet today, education policymakers are speaking less emphatically about access and more explicitly about completion, given the Obama administration's goal of producing another five million college graduates by 2020. At a time when colleges and universities are stepping up efforts to increase student retention and graduation rates, faculty and staff struggle to ensure that the most at-risk populations—low-income students, academically underprepared students, students of color, first-generation students, returning adult students—find success in college. Their chances of completing a degree are slim given that these students are burdened with meeting the rising costs of college and getting adequate high school academic preparation that allows them to succeed in college.

This issue revisits Laura I. Rendón's (1994) validation theory as originally conceived with a particular applicability for low-income, first-generation college students. Rendón defined validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). This special issue provides quantitative and qualitative research evidence that over time validation has emerged as a viable theory that can be employed to better understand the success of underserved students, improve teaching and learning, understand student development in college, and frame college student success strategies.

Scholarship and Research

In the issue's introductory article, Laura I. Rendón Linares and Susana M. Muñoz outline how the theory was developed and how it has been employed by both researchers and practitioners to generate research findings and to frame institutional student success strategies. The authors also offer a review of theories which overlap with validation theory and discuss theory, pedagogic, and research enhancements. Reviewing the corpus of quantitative and qualitative literature on validation theory, Amaury Nora, Angela Urick, and Patricia D. Quijada Cerecer examine the diverse ways validation has been defined since its foundation and review validation in its various proxy forms as well as its impact on students. Two quantitative studies provide empirical evidence on the impact of validation on students and ultimately on how educators can use validation as a way to

frame two- and four-year institutional strategies and learning environments that foster student success. Elizabeth Allanbrook Barnett employs multiple linear regression analyses to examine the influence of faculty validation on urban community college students' sense of integration in college and intent to persist. Sylvia Hurtado, Marcela Cuellar, and Chelsea Guillermo-Wann examine two validation constructs—student perceptions of academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation—in the new survey instrument, Diverse Learning Environments (DLE).

From a qualitative research perspective, Nana Osei-Kofi employs narrative inquiry to explore the life history of validation theorist Laura I. Rendón. The emphasis is on how Rendón's identity and life experiences shaped her as a theorist/researcher with an emphasis on the interplay between her life story and work on validation theory. Ryan Evely Gildersleeve employs participatory action research to explore the stories and lived experiences of Mexican migrant students to extend Rendón's validation theory with the development of a neo-critical validation theory that takes into account struggles of power, agency, and identity.

From the Field

This section outlines ways that validation has been employed to frame institutional student success programs in a two- and four-year institution. Rolita Flores Ezeonu describes validation at Highline Community College and discusses how validation fosters a therapeutic learning environment in the college's ESL-to-Credit intervention. Donna E. Ekal, Sandra Rollins Hurley, and Richard Padilla describe how validation theory has become the theoretical foundation for the University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP) student success plan.



Scholarship and Research

Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions

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Abstract

Laura I. Rendón (1994) introduced validation theory with particular applicability to low-income, first-generation students enrolled in higher education. Validation theory was offered as a new way to theorize how these students might find success in college, especially those who found it difficult to get involved, had been invalidated in the past, or had doubts about their ability to succeed. This article gives special attention to: 1) how the theory was developed, including the theoretical foundations of the theory; 2) how the theory has been employed as the foundation to frame studies, discuss student success, improve pedagogy, foster student development, and frame institutional strategies; 3) which theoretical perspectives overlap with validation theory; 4) epistemological and ontological assumptions in validation theory; and 5) future directions that could enhance the theory, as well as advance the future research and practice of validation.

Introduction

Introduced by Laura I. Rendón in 1994, validation theory slowly yet significantly found an audience of scholars and practitioners who sought a theory that could speak to the issues and backgrounds of low-income, first-generation students (the first in the family to attend college), as well as adult students returning to college after being away for some time. As originally conceived, validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment.

Often, students labeled as “nontraditional” attend affordable community colleges and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving Institutions, as opposed to elite, expensive, research-extensive universities. “Traditional” students are those whose families have a history of college attendance, come from middle- and upper-class families, and typically feel confident about attending college. Conversations and expectations about college attendance are generally part of family life. Conversely, for nontraditional students the decision to attend college is typically not automatic or expected. Students struggle weighing the costs and benefits of attending college versus working full time to help supplement the family income. Some students question if they are “college material,” which often stems from past invalidation in their prior schooling experiences. Many of these students hail from communities where college graduates are scarce. Consequently, they have few role models and friends in their communities who can help them navigate the college-going process (i.e., filling out college admissions and financial aid applications, taking college entrance exams, selecting appropriate programs). While college involvement is a desired activity for these students, they are often unaware of the availability of opportunities and resources because they do not know what questions to ask. For nontraditional students, institutional validation can be the key to attaining success in college (Rendón, 1994, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

The Development of Validation Theory

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education funded the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, which was headquartered at Pennsylvania State University. A key research strand dealt with the transition to college and involved well-known researchers and student affairs leaders such as Patrick Terenzini, Lee Upcraft, Susan B. Millar, Romero Jalomo (then a doctoral student at Arizona State University), Kevin Allison, Patti Gregg, and Laura I. Rendón. These scholars were primarily interested in assessing the influences of students’ out-of-class experiences on learning and retention. To do so, they designed and conducted a qualitative study involving focus group interviews. A total of 132 first-year students were interviewed. Sites included a predominantly minority community college in the Southwest, a predominantly White, residential, liberal arts college in a middle Atlantic state, a predominantly

Black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in the Midwest, and a large, predominantly White, residential research university in a middle Atlantic state (Rendón, 1994).

Researchers worked with an institutional contact person who recruited the students to participate in the focus group interviews. Students who volunteered to be interviewed were paid \$10 for participating in focus groups lasting between 1–1.5 hours. The sample yield included a diverse student body in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and residency (residential and commuting students). The original transition to college study was framed using Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement and Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of 20 years of research on the effects of college on students. An open-ended interview protocol was designed. Questions dealt with issues such as how students made decisions to attend college, their expectations for and the reality of college, significant people and events in their transition, selected characteristics of the transition, and the general effects of college on students (Rendón, 1994).

Once interviews had been transcribed, the research team held telephone conference calls to analyze what students were saying about their first-year experience in college. Initially, the researchers were looking for emergent themes related to college student involvement, given that the scholars were employing Astin's (1985) theory of involvement as the study's framework. As the study progressed, two revelations became apparent: 1) there were stark differences in the way low-income and affluent, "traditional" students experienced the transition to college, and 2) at some point, low-income students suddenly began to believe in themselves not so much because of their college involvement, but because some person(s), in- or outside-of-college took the initiative to reach out to them to affirm their innate capacity to learn.

For example, when students were asked when they knew they could be successful, they did not typically cite instances of getting involved in college. Rather, they spoke, often with excitement and awe, about the reassurance and validation they received from individuals they encountered in college (i.e., faculty, peers, counselors, advisers, and/or coaches) and the outside-of-college personal world of family and friends (sisters, brothers, partners, spouses, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts). For many students, this was the first time

someone had expressed care and concern and the first time someone made them feel that their prior life experiences and knowledge were valuable. For example, validating experiences included instances such as when:

- Faculty took the time to learn their names and refer to them by name.
- Faculty gave students opportunities to witness themselves as successful learners.
- Faculty ensured that the curriculum reflected student backgrounds.
- Faculty shared knowledge with students and became partners in learning.
- Faculty told students, “You can do this, and I am going to help you.”
- Coaches took the time to help students select courses and plan their futures.
- Parents, spouses, and children supported students in their quest to earn a college degree.
- Faculty encouraged students to support each other (i.e., form friendships, develop peer networks, share assignments, provide positive reinforcement).
- Faculty and staff served as mentors for students and made an effort to meet with them outside of class such as in patio areas, in cafeterias, and/or in the library.

Reflecting carefully on what students were saying about what was most meaningful to them as they navigated the transition to college, the term “validation” seemed to make the most sense. The impact of validation on students who have experienced powerlessness, doubts about their own ability to succeed, and/or lack of care cannot be understated. Validation helped these kinds of students to acquire a confident, motivating, “I can do it” attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student.

Theoretical Foundation of Validation Theory

Rendón (1994) took the originally conceived construct of validation and theorized its implications for student development and learning in an article that appeared in *Innovative Higher Education*. In developing the theory of validation, Rendón (1994) was influenced by the work of feminist researchers who had produced a groundbreaking study of women as learners, *Women's Ways*

of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). These scholars discussed a class of women who were essentially “undereducated,” and felt powerless and voiceless. These women had come to believe that “they could not think or learn as well as men” (p. 16). They “feared being wrong, revealing their ignorance or being laughed at” (p. 57). Coming from all walks of life, and cutting across class, racial/ethnic, age, and educational backgrounds, some of these women had experienced a powerful developmental progression “from silence or conformity to external definitions of truth into subjectivism” (p. 54).

In short, these women had moved from relying solely on external “authorities” for reliance on truth to acknowledging and working with an internal authority which recognized that truth and understanding relied on considering multiple perspectives, including one’s own personal experience. What had transformed these women was affirmation provided by maternal or nurturing authorities (in these cases: therapists, peers, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and/or close friends). These sympathetic, nonjudgmental individuals helped women to “begin to hear that maybe she is not such an incompetent, a dummy, or an oddity. She has *experience* [original emphasis] that may be valuable to others; she, too, can know things” (pp. 60–61). A paradoxical situation appeared to be at work here. External confirmation from nurturant authorities was helpful in order to get women to focus on their internal, subjective views about their ability to become knowers in their own right. While women relied on external agents as powerful knowledge bearers, they also recognized the self as a shared authority in meaning making and knowledge production.

Similarly, Rendón (2002) noted:

Many nontraditional students come to college needing a sense of direction and wanting guidance but not in a patronizing way. They do not succeed well in an invalidating, sterile, fiercely competitive context for learning that is still present in many college classrooms today. For example, some faculty and staff view certain kinds of students as incapable of learning, assault students with information and/or withhold information, instill doubt and fear in students, distance themselves from students, silence and oppress students, and/or create fiercely competitive learning environments that pit students against each other. This kind of “no pain, no gain” learning context

greatly disadvantages nontraditional student populations such as working-class women and minorities. (p. 644)

This suggests that many students encounter subtle and overt forms of racism, sexism, and oppression on college campuses. While some students are perfectly able to overcome these potentially devastating and invalidating experiences through sheer determination and will to succeed, it is likely that the most vulnerable students will respond by dropping out of college. Validation theory provides a framework that faculty and staff can employ to work with students in a way that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. The most vulnerable students will likely benefit from external validation that can serve as the means to move students toward gaining internal strength resulting in increased confidence and agency in shaping their own lives. As such, both external affirmation and internal acknowledgements of self-competence are important in shaping academic success. What is being theorized is that for many low-income, first-generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students toward acknowledgement of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality.

Elements of Validation

The theory of validation has six elements. Rendón (1994) indicated that “validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). This first element places the responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents such as faculty, advisers, coaches, lab assistants, and counselors. Nontraditional students will likely find it difficult to navigate the world of college by themselves. They will be unlikely to take advantage of tutoring centers, faculty office hours, or the library, because they will be working off campus, will feel uncomfortable asking questions, and/or will not want to be viewed as stupid or lazy. Consequently, it is critical that validating agents actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support, as opposed to expecting students to ask questions first. There are some who would say that validation is akin to coddling students to the point that it might make them weaker, and that college students should be able to survive on their own. However, validation is not about pampering students or making them weaker. On the contrary, it is about making

students stronger in terms of assisting them to believe in their ability to learn, acquire self-worth, and increase their motivation to succeed. Validating actions should be authentic, caring, and nonpatronizing.

The second element speaks to the notion that when validation is present, students feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth. Whomever the student turns to for validation, the affirming action should serve to confirm that the student brings knowledge to college and has the potential to succeed.

The third element is that validation is likely a prerequisite for student development. In other words, when students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to learn and to get involved in college life. The

When validation is present, students feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth.

fourth element is that validation can occur in and out of class. Validating agents actively affirm and support students on a consistent basis. Fifth is that validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process which begins early and can continue over time. Numerous instances of validation over the time the student spends in college can result in a richer college experience. Finally, because nontraditional students can benefit from early validating experiences and positive interactions in college, validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience, especially during the first few weeks of class and the first year of college.

Types of Validation

There are two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to “trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student” (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). In classrooms, faculty can create learning experiences that affirm the real possibility that students can be successful. One way this can be done is by inviting guest speakers and exposing students to individuals who come from backgrounds similar to the students. One of the reasons why many students find ethnic studies programs so appealing is because they are able to learn in a validating classroom context. Students can cultivate a learning a community, have professors who draw out

student strengths, learn about their history, see themselves in the curriculum, and interact and develop close relationships with faculty and peers who reflect their own backgrounds. Another example is that faculty can validate the notion that what students know and bring to the classroom is as valuable as what others think and know. This calls for attention to the curriculum so that students witness themselves in what they are reading and learning. Yet another example is that faculty can affirm student cultural experience and voice by having students write about topics rooted in students' personal histories. Rendón (1994) also noted another example of academic validation, which can occur when faculty members design activities where students can witness themselves as powerful learners. In this example, the participant, a community college student who had been out of school for a long time and had been raising children on her own, initially believed she might not be able to find success in college. When asked, "When did you believe that you could be a capable college student?" she enthusiastically referred to her communications class, in which she had been taped giving a speech. The student reflected on the experience of watching herself on tape:

I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk ... and you observe this individual that has blossomed into something that I hadn't even been aware ... I would sit in awe and say, "That's me. Look at you. And I like me." (p. 41)

In a validating classroom, faculty and teaching assistants actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support and provide opportunities for students to validate each other through encouraging comments that validate the work of peers.

Interpersonal validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to foster students' personal development and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). In a validating classroom, the instructor affirms students as persons, not just as students. Faculty do not detach themselves from students. Rather, faculty build supporting, caring relationships with students and allow students to validate each other and to build a social network through activities such as forming study groups and sharing cell phone numbers.

Review of Research Studies Using Validation Theory

A review of quantitative and qualitative studies over the past 15 years reveals that validation theory has been employed in a variety of ways.

Validation as a Theoretical Framework

Validation has provided a theoretical framework to guide research that attempts to understand the college experience for low-income, first-generation students such as students of color, developmental education students, immigrants, community college students, and international students (Ayala Austin, 2007; Barnett, 2011; Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Dandridge Rice, 2002; Ezeonu, 2006; Gupton, Castelo Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2007; Harvey, 2010; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004; Stein, 2006; Vasquez, 2007). Collectively, these studies provide the following key findings:

- Some students experience invalidation while in college. Examples of invalidating actions include some faculty who students believe are unapproachable, inaccessible, and often dehumanizing toward students.
- Academic validation can take multiple forms. For example, faculty, counselors, and advisers can affirm the real possibility that students can be successful college students. Faculty can also validate students' cultural experiences and voices in the classroom, provide opportunities for students to witness themselves as capable learners, and actively reach out to students to offer support and academic assistance.
- Faculty could benefit from training to provide academic and interpersonal validation for their students.
- Students benefit significantly from validation. Students are proud when they are recognized as capable learners, and when they develop a strong sense of confidence. They feel cared about when faculty and staff take the extra time to support them during difficult times.
- Employing validation does not mean that faculty need to lower their academic expectations.

Validation as a Framework to Foster Student Understanding and Success

In numerous cases, the theory is cited in literature reviews, research findings, and recommendations (often alongside other student success, engagement, and persistence theories) when attempting to provide educators and policymakers with a better understanding of at-risk, underrepresented populations and when proposing strategies to improve student retention, transfer, and academic success (Bragg, 2001; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Chaves, 2006; Cox, 2009; Dodson, Montgomery, & Brown, 2009; Jain, 2010; Jalomo, 1995; Maramba, 2008; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004; Martinez Aleman, 2000; Moreno, 2002; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Nora, 2003; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Nuñez, forthcoming; Nuñez, Murkami-Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2000, 2005, 2009; Tinto, 1998; Smith, 2009; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Terenzini, et. al., 1994; Woodlief, Thomas, & Orozco, 2003). The theory has also been used to frame student success initiatives (Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Richter & Antonucci, 2010; University of Texas at El Paso, 2006). Taken together, these research articles posit that:

- Low-income, first-generation students require both in- and out-of-class validating support strategies and communities comprised of faculty, counselors, advisers, family, peers, and professionals.
- Student knowledge and experience should be used as a learning resource and be validated in the curriculum.
- Students' personal identities and occupational roles should be validated.
- A validating team of faculty and counselors can provide students with care, encouragement, and support, as well as key information needed to transfer and academic skills needed to be successful in college.

Validation as a Tool to Improve Pedagogic Practice

Validation theory has been employed in connection with the improvement of teaching and learning practices through the use of validating environments (Rendón, 2009, 2002) and in the development of teaching approaches with concern for inclusive, liberating pedagogy (Bragg, 2001; Jehangir, 2009; Nuñez, Marakami-Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010; Rendón, 2009). Liberatory pedagogy

works against the oppressive banking model of education that oppresses and exploits students (Freire, 1971). Instead, a liberatory pedagogy honors diverse ways of knowing, invites all to participate in knowledge production, allows both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge, promotes an ethic of care, helps students find voice and self-worth, and works with a curriculum that is democratic, inclusive, and reflective of student backgrounds. Researchers such as Nuñez, Murakami-Ramalho, and Cuero (2010), as well as Rendón, (2009), contend that faculty need to critically reflect upon their own assumptions of students. Often, students of color and first-generation students are regarded as non-college material, and some faculty view these students from a deficit standpoint. Validation theory is related to the tenets of liberatory pedagogy in the following ways:

- Faculty become accessible, supportive validating partners in learning with students.
- Faculty validate student cultural identities. Validation of one's cultural identity and prior knowledge can address the existing inequities with educational attainment among student-of-color populations.
- The classroom invites students to explore the connections between their personal histories, group, and community contexts to allow students to affirm their own identities and create new knowledge. This can also help students decipher abstract concepts and become comfortable challenging ideas in class.
- The curriculum contains assignments that reflect student backgrounds.

Validation as a Student Development Theory

For the next generation of student affairs practitioners and scholars, student development theory is important in understanding the developmental process of college students. At the same time, researchers (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) have cautioned practitioners and scholars to keep in mind: 1) the applicability of theory in various contexts (theories must consider environmental factors), 2) the generalization of theory to all student experiences (theories must consider student differences), and 3) the utilization of theory as a solution to student behaviors (theories are not prescriptions to remedy student behavior but rather a way in which students can engage and reflect about their own developmental process).

Validation theory (Rendón, 1994), can be considered to have an “interactionist perspective” (Evans et. al, 2010, p. 29) that considers environmental factors and agents such as “... physical surroundings, organizational structures, human aggregates, and individuals” (p. 29) that can either help or hinder students’ growth and development. Nancy Schlossberg’s (1989) concept of mattering and marginality has attributes of interpersonal validation by focusing on human needs such as attention, caring, feeling needed and appreciated, and identifying with others.

Theoretical Perspectives Supporting Validation Theory

Theoretical perspectives posed by numerous scholars share remarkable consonance with some key elements of validation theory. The theories briefly summarized below have important implications for creating validating, inclusive learning environments where all students (regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, or socioeconomic background) can thrive.

ABC model of creating inclusive environments. Daniel Tatum (2007) posits that inclusive classrooms should focus on an ABC model, where A is affirming identity, B is building community, and C is cultivating leadership. Affirming identity “refers to the fact that students need to see themselves—important dimensions of their identity—reflected in the environment around them, in the curriculum, among the faculty and staff, and in the faces of their classmates to avoid feelings of invisibility or marginality that can undermine student success” (p. 22). Building community “refers to the importance of creating a school community in which everyone has a sense of belonging, while cultivating leadership prepares students to be active citizens in society” (p. 22).

Community cultural wealth model. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model employs a critical race theory framework to challenge deficit-based perspectives that view all low-income students as marginal and as possessing limited social, educational, and cultural assets. Instead, Yosso (2005) views low-income students from an asset perspective, and theorizes that students may possess at least one but often multiple forms of capital. This capital may be categorized as 1) aspirational (referring to student hopes and dreams), 2) linguistic (speaking more than one language), 3) familial (ways of knowing in immediate and extended family), 4) social (significant others who provide support), 5) navigational (ability to maneuver institutional structures), and 6) resistance (ability to recognize and challenge inequities).

Funds of knowledge. Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez (2001) worked with the concept of funds of knowledge “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Funds of knowledge is an asset-based theory where teachers can become learners, and can come to know their students and the families of their students in new and distinct ways. The theory of funds of knowledge debunks the pervasive, deficit-based notion that linguistically and culturally diverse working-class minority households lack worthwhile knowledge and experiences. When faculty and staff take time to get to know students—to acknowledge and validate their backgrounds, culture, family sacrifices, challenges they have overcome, etc.—they can view students with more respect and understanding. In the process of working more closely with students, faculty can potentially draw out hidden talents and abilities.

Liberatory pedagogy. Scholars such as Paulo Freire (1971) and Laura I. Rendón (2009), among others such as Peter McLaren (1995), Antonia Darder (2002), bell hooks (1994), and Henry Giroux (1988), have advanced the notion that education must transcend the “banking model” (Freire, 1971), where knowledge is simply “deposited” in students’ minds and faculty operate at a distance from students. These scholars posit that the banking model is oppressive in nature, exploiting and dominating students, as well as working against democratic structures that honor diverse ways of knowing and participation in knowledge production. A liberatory pedagogy allows both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge. Through an ethic of care, compassion, and validation, faculty and staff can liberate oppressed students from self-limiting views about their ability to learn and can help students find voice and self-worth. The curriculum is democratic, inclusive and reflective of student backgrounds. Ultimately, a liberatory pedagogy has the potential to transform both faculty and students who break away from conventional ways of teaching and learning that oppress and marginalize students. Students can begin to define themselves as competent college students and find their sense of purpose and voice (Rendón, 2009).

Ethic of care. At the core of validation is authentic caring and concern. Both Nel Noddings (1984) and Angela Valenzuela (1999) expressed concern that many schools are focused on detachment, impersonal and objective language,

and nonpersonal content. These forms of invalidation can lead students to believe that who they are and what they represent are not valued. Noddings (1984) and Valenzuela (1999) argued that an ethic of caring can foster positive relationships between faculty and students. Noddings (1984) noted that care is basic in all human life; all people want to feel that they are being cared for in their lives. Simple actions such as calling students by name, expressing concern, and offering assistance can go a long way toward building caring, validating relationships with students.

Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions in Validation Theory

From the discussion above, one can conclude that validation theory finds strong conceptual, theoretical, and pragmatic support from different theorists and bodies of research. This rich body of literature illuminates what could be considered the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the theory. Validation theory:

- Works with students as whole human beings. Attention is placed not only on academic development, but also on emotional, social, and inner-life aspects of human development (i.e., caring, support, reflective processes, relationship-building, nurturance).
- Embraces students' personal voices and experiences, which are as important as traditional, objective ways of knowing.
- Is an asset-based (as opposed to deficit-based) model. A key assumption is that students, regardless of background, bring a reservoir of funds of knowledge and experiences that render these students open to learning with validating instructors and classroom climates. When validating agents work with students as possessing a reservoir of assets, the dominant view that poor students only have deficits is shattered and decentered.
- Is rooted in the experiences of low-income, nontraditional students. Validation theory emerged directly from student voices, and the theory places students as the center of analysis.
- Opens the door for faculty and staff to work with students to promote equitable outcomes, to eliminate racist and sexist views about students, and to promote inclusive classrooms.
- Engenders transformative consequences for students as well as for validating agents. With validation, students can begin to view themselves as competent college students and college staff can begin to work

with students in a more respectful, compassionate manner, while not sacrificing academic rigor.

- Is focused on making students academically and personally stronger, as opposed to coddling or patronizing students. The emphasis is on working with student assets in order to unleash potential to learn, promote well being, and help students feel that they are being cared for in a way that promotes their ability to succeed in college.
- Shifts the role of the institution from passive to proactive in terms of promoting learning and retention. In other words, it is not enough for the institution to say it offers student services. Proactive measures to actually get students to take advantage of these services must also be in place. This means that college faculty and student affairs staff must be ready to actively reach out to students (as opposed to having student reach out to them first), be accessible, and be open to establishing close working relationships with students.

Validation Theory: Enhancements and New Directions

Like all theories, validation theory has its strengths and limitations. Future research, theoretical perspectives and practice strategies should consider how to enhance the theory.

Research Enhancements

Most of the studies employing validation theory have been qualitative in nature, and more quantitative analyses are needed to confirm the impact of validation on student learning and overall academic success, including changes in motivation, attitudes toward learning, and identity changes, among others. Research questions to consider include the following: To what extent does validation predict retention? To what extent does validation overcome past invalidation and/or feelings of incompetence? In what ways does validation contribute to identity development? What are the liberatory elements of validation?

In the original study (Rendón, 1994) where validation emerged as a theoretical construct directly from the voices of students themselves, the analysis did not specify how the theory could apply to all kinds of students with a multiplicity of

diverse backgrounds (i.e., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, academic ability, physical ability, religion, sexuality). It is appropriate that future studies apply the theory to understudied populations. As future research develops, it will be important to examine the theory closely with an eye toward providing more specific examples of academic and interpersonal validation in and out of the classroom context.

The original study also did not fully employ a social justice perspective. Validation theory has liberatory and equity elements related to power and agency, and future studies could explore the role of validation with a social justice framework.

Theory Enhancements

Theorizing about academic success for underserved students will become increasingly important as more low-income, first-generation, and older students choose to attend college. Advancing theory for these students requires a theoretical critique of notions of self-efficacy. The uncritical acceptance of the premise that all students can and should be successful on their own seems to privilege affluent students who have significant financial, social, and academic capital. Students lacking these forms of capital will ultimately want to function on their own, but studies employing validation theory demonstrate that there is a class of students that does initially benefit from nonpatronizing, caring, external authorities who can provide affirmation and support. This external support can eventually translate to internal strength as students gain confidence and agency.

Related theories noted in this article (i.e., ethic of care, mattering, funds of knowledge, etc.) support the premise of validation. It is likely that both internal acknowledgements of self-confidence and external forms of validation are important; one is not better than the other. However, future theoretical perspectives should illuminate the concept of self-efficacy with a deep critical analysis. For example, given the oppressive, invalidating elements in some parts of higher education (i.e., racism, monocultural curricula, stereotyping of students, etc.) how can students develop their own form of affirmation?

While validation theory has been explored as a student development theory, it is important that educators understand how the theory contributes to student development.

The transformative power of validation for both students and faculty also needs to be confirmed and expanded as future studies are developed.

Pedagogic Enhancements

The role of validation in fostering a liberatory, inclusive teaching and learning context needs to be further defined. Training in the use of in- and out-of-class validation could benefit educators with whom students are most in contact such as faculty, teaching assistants, advisers, and counselors. Faculty also need to engage in self-reflexivity which explores their own identities, assumptions they make about students, positionalities, and how they have located themselves within the classroom context (Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004).

Final Thoughts

Validation has emerged as a viable theory that can be employed to better understand the success of underserved students, improve teaching and learning, understand student development in college, and frame college student success strategies. With its underlying tenets of social justice and equity, validation theory can serve researchers and practitioners alike with a framework to create liberatory classroom environments, work compassionately with students as whole human beings who can best function with an ethic of care and support, and transform underserved students into powerful learners who overcome past invalidation and oppression. For those researchers and practitioners who seek a socially conscious, effective way to theorize student success, as well as to understand and work with underserved students, validation theory holds great promise and merits increased research attention

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Validating Students: A Conceptualization and Overview of Its Impact on Student Experiences and Outcomes

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Abstract

The importance of the validation of students through transformative teaching and counseling (Rendón, 1994) emerged as a framework to conceptualize the underlying mechanisms necessary to validate the experiences, expectations, and performance of college and university students, particularly low-income students. In this paper, we examine the divergent perspectives of how validation has been defined since its foundation. We also draw upon a corpus of qualitative and quantitative data that centers on the role of validation in all its different proxy forms as well as on its impact on an ethnically diverse group of secondary and postsecondary students' experiences and outcomes in educational settings. The findings on validating both secondary and postsecondary students' experiences point to implications and recommendations for policy and practice that illuminate ways to increase the engagement, persistence, and graduation rates of these students.

One of the most common practices in higher education research is the use of proxies to represent theoretical constructs that underlie quantitative models and qualitative frameworks in the study of student persistence. When it comes

Author note: The data in the article emerges from a corpus of data on American Indian/Native American youth that was collected and analyzed by Patricia D. Quijada Cerecer. Quijada Cerecer would like to thank the Pueblo community for sharing their lived experiences.

to quantitative studies, often datasets that are available for testing hypothesized structural models have been created without much thought to theoretical perspectives or conceptual points of reference, resulting in an array of survey items that were not intended to represent specific latent constructs. In qualitative studies, emerging categories or themes derived from a data reduction are often labeled one thing, when in fact they may or may not represent a concept appropriately. Moreover, a lack of communication among researchers from different disciplines or methodological orientations leads to the introduction or use of different wording when discussing the same construct or phenomenon under study.

Because researchers often do not communicate with each other, one is led to believe that they are discussing entirely different phenomena, when in reality these investigators incorporate proxies with a great deal of conceptual overlap and are much more similar than different. This practice results in different disciplines neglecting to inform each other, ultimately resulting in no integration or synthesis of diverse bodies of literature that capture the same underlying construct. One such variable in the student persistence literature is the concept of student validation.

Student Validation: Opposing yet Overlapping Views

While validation as a theoretical perspective was not widely acknowledged until first introduced by Rendón (1994), research by investigators such as Bean (1982), Hurtado (1994), Nora (1987, 1990), and Nora and Cabrera (1993, 1996) focusing on the dilemma of student attrition in higher education had previously touched upon the fundamental nature of validating students. Nora (1987, 1990), for example, focused on the importance of support and encouragement in different forms and sources by significant others. Hurtado (1994) concentrated on the issue of campus climates. In all instances, whether family or instructor support or overall campus climate, these constructs served as “proxies” for the validation of students inside the classroom or around the campus. The underlying premise captured by the different conceptual meanings attributed to a variety of variables and themes was the same as that captured by the term validation. Be it the use of words and gestures that convey a support system by the student’s parents, words of encouragement provided by an instructor, or the feeling of belonging on a campus, the underlying premise remains the same—a sense of caring on the part of a significant other, their acceptance as human beings, a sensitivity on the part of the instructor, and an affirmation as valuable contributors to the learning that is taking place in the classroom or on campus.

Other investigators who have incorporated Rendón's (1994) notion of validation have also relied on the use of proxies. Some have focused on the notion of a sense of belonging provided by peers as the way to validate students (Martinez Aleman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In such cases, validation has focused around relationships with peers and the sense that they were accepted or valued by their own groups. Another set of research studies has centered on the notion of mentoring as a form of validating students (Barnett, 2011; Bragg, 2001; Crisp, 2009; Crisp, 2010; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Nora, 2001; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2008; Suarez, 2003). Within this set of research studies, Bragg (2001) cited respect, support, and caring as influential in bringing about changes in instructional strategies and access/outcomes.

Proxies for validation are not only limited to faculty behavior and student attitudes or perceptions of caring and being valued on campus. In his examination of students' sense of belonging, Jehangir (2009) established that a curriculum that values student experiences fosters the development of a sense of belonging and the "re-position[ing]" of self on campus, a view that focuses on student validation. At the same time, Schuetz (2008) found that students' sense of belonging on campus was also influenced by the validation students received from their relationships with faculty, peers, and administrative and office personnel. Furthermore, Museus and Quaye (2009) ascertained that cultural agents from the home or campus cultures were important in shaping students' cultural identities. Those campuses that valued cultural diversity and demonstrated it throughout their environments provided a source of validation that translated into positive cultural identities for undergraduates.

In much the same way, Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) had previously noted the importance of student perceptions surrounding university comfort, social support, and self-beliefs in dealing with culture shock upon entering college. Padilla (1999) interpreted Rendón's (1994) validation theory as an acceptance of experiential knowledge in the classroom, which would provide additional support for students when overcoming such barriers. All represent some form of student validation on the part of the institution.

The final set of research studies that include proxies for validation are those that focuses on a student's self-worth or self-concept. Tinto's (1997) early study took notice of the fact that academic involvements are instrumental in shaping a student's

sense of ability and subsequently validate the presence of the student on campus. Hernandez and Lopez (2004–2005) examined research on personal, environmental, involvement, and sociocultural factors that influence student retention and found that affirmation of students led to the development of a positive academic self-concept. Likewise, in a study of Latino/a transfer culture, Perez and Ceja (2010) noted that affirming students as knowledgeable and valuable provides students with a sense of self-worth, also a proxy for student validation.

Quantitative Proxies of Validation and Their Impact on Student Outcomes

This section will examine the impact of validation as a proxy or under its own label, on different student outcomes. The first section focuses on quantitative studies in which the selection of variables underlying a specific conceptual framework incorporates an aspect of student validation.

Studies Centered on Faculty/Institution Validation

Barnett's (2011) study on academic integration and intent to persist, based on Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, incorporated aspects of Rendón's (1994) validation theory within the framework of her investigation—student interactions with faculty/staff. Barnett (2011) tested the influence of endogenous and exogenous constructs on two outcome measures—academic integration and intent to persist. To capture a measure of student validation, Barnett constructed an instrument with student validation items that identified experiences involving faculty validation. The study analyzed its relationship with a student's sense of academic integration and intent to persist. Barnett utilized exploratory factor analysis and established four latent constructs among the survey items: (1) *students known and valued*, (2) *caring instruction*, (3) *appreciation for diversity*, and (4) *mentoring*. All four constructs were found to positively impact indicators of psychological and behavioral academic integration within Tinto's (1993) model. Her findings revealed that *caring instruction* was the strongest validation predictor of integration. Two other proxies for validation, *students known and valued* and *mentoring*, also exerted direct, positive, and significant relationships with a student's intent to persist. Barnett's (2011) findings substantiated Rendón's (1994) validation theory as an extension of Tinto's academic integration and, subsequently, the intent to persist in college. She suggests that faculty members must increase the cultivation of student skills and become aware of the impact of student affirmation within the classroom, further contributing to greater student persistence.

In a discussion of the challenges community colleges face in offering an assortment of programs to meet the needs of a diverse student population, Bragg (2001) explored issues related to student access and the maturation of the community college system. She introduced Rendón's (1994) validation theory as an instructional strategy that can "transform underprepared students into college-ready learners through the respect, support, and care that faculty demonstrate through meaningful interpersonal relationships" (p. 105). Bragg (2001) asserted that when faculty and administrative leadership engage in policies and practices that incorporate validating experiences for undergraduates, student outcomes are positively impacted.

Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2009) also focused specifically on an institution's effort to support Latina/os sustainment and student graduation. All factors examined centered on the increased involvement of Latino students with faculty and other students in a culturally congruent environment. The authors noted that upon entering college Latino students experience a culture shock. Positive relationships built with faculty members through institutional efforts, specifically with faculty members of color, serve as a cultural liaison, providing students with feelings of confidence or validation (Rendón, 1994) that help them succeed in the new environment.

Although the discussion on support and encouragement from significant others was not all focused on faculty, Nora (2001) introduced the notion that support and encouragement of students comes in different forms and from different agents and mostly concentrated on aspects of positive reinforcement (Nora et al., 1996; Nora, 2004; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005), affirmation (Nora et al., 1996, 1999, 2001), caring, and mentoring (Nora & Crisp, 2009). Nora's (2001) in-depth examination of Tinto's "rites of passage" conceptually analyzed the relationship of support and encouragement from significant others through the separation, transition, and incorporation stages. Nora argued that different forms and sources of support and encouragement by family, friends, and faculty are all proxies for Rendón's (1994) student validation both in and outside of the classroom. Nora (2001) posited that the building and maintaining of relationships with significant others support the students' concurrent development through the separation, transition, and incorporation phases. Subsequently, these processes validate their enrollment, participation, and engagement during their time in college by alleviating some of the stress related to the change of environment, ultimately

culminating in student retention and degree attainment. Along this same line of reasoning, Nora, along with other scholars (e.g. Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992, Nora, Attinasi, & Matonak, 1990; Pascarella, 1980; Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella, 1981) noted that student responses regarding their satisfaction and commitment to an institution also serve as proxies for the concern and care—validation—they received through these stages of transition.

Studies Centered on a Sense of Belonging

Zhao and Kuh (2004) examined the relationship between participating in learning communities and student engagement in a range of educational activities of first-year and senior students from 365 four-year institutions. They defined learning communities as collaborative learning experiences and involvement in academic and social activities that extend beyond the classroom. Learning communities were positively related to student gains in personal and social development, practical competence, and general education. Overall, students demonstrated the ability of the small groups within the learning communities to increase the student's sense of belonging to the university and overall community through their relationship with other students and faculty members. The authors speculated that through collaborative learning, students were able to share experiences and to have greater access to faculty that increased the opportunities for students to feel more validated.

Schuetz (2008) developed and tested a conceptual model of student engagement based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002). The framework describes the psychological need for belonging, as well as the feeling of competence and autonomy to increase engagement. The author concluded that regardless of academic preparation and other obligations outside of school, students need the opportunity to experience belonging, competence, and autonomy. Schuetz relied on Rendón's (1994) validation theory to describe the type of belonging necessary for students to succeed. Schuetz interpreted this explanation as incidents of early outreach to underrepresented students in order to demonstrate a belief in their ability and to take an active interest in them.

Studies Centered on Valuing Cultural Identities

Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) examined the extent to which university comfort, social support, and self-beliefs were interrelated and predicted academic nonpersistence for Latino/a undergraduates. The authors utilized

Rendón (1994), Hurtado (1994), and Hurtado and Carter (1997) to describe the environmental factors and possible cultural shock students experience as a measure of university comfort. Subscales were created for social support, self-beliefs, and the criterion variable, persistence decisions. In the first set of results, the authors found that university comfort and social support, as well as university comfort and self-beliefs, were significantly related to the study's outcomes. The results demonstrated that an increase in cultural congruity, more positive perceptions of the university environment, and a decrease in perceptions of barriers would occur if one stayed in school, which was related to an increase in family social support. In addition, these findings also indicated that these same positive perceptions of university comfort (suspected as different validation experiences) were strongly associated with an increase in self-efficacy beliefs. In conclusion, social support and university comfort (through words of encouragement, affirming words, sense of belonging) were the strongest overall predictors of academic nonpersistence decisions for the sample of Latino/a undergraduate students.

Studies Centered on Self-Worth/Self-Concept

Tinto (1997) concluded that several main aspects influence a student's decision to remain enrolled: level of involvement, educational setting (two- or four-year institution, level of academic and social integration), and amount of integration outside and inside of the classroom. Tinto relied on Rendón's (1994) theory of student validation to describe the importance of extending integration outside of the classroom. In line with the results from his previous studies, Tinto (1993) recommended particular organizational reforms to increase student persistence, including a focus on first-year college students as a distinctive unit, a multidisciplinary program, student cohorts, learning communities as a curricular structure, an emphasis on shared knowledge, and an extension of classroom learning outside of class. Through these reforms, students are more likely to feel validated as students, individuals, and members of an educational institution. Academic and nonacademic involvements help to shape a person's sense of ability and feeling that his or her presence is validated on campus.

In a review of student retention, Hernandez and Lopez (2004–2005) discussed the current understanding of personal, environmental, involvement, and sociocultural influences that impact student retention in order to make recommendations to increase Latino persistence in higher education. The authors argue for the development of a student's self-concept; the involvement

of family in the student's life; sufficient financial aid; the institutional development of positive racial climates, ethnic communities, and living/working conditions; and the level of student involvement through faculty-student interactions, mentorships, and participation in student organizations. Hernandez and Lopez (2004–2005) utilized Rendón's (1994) validation theory as the driving force for students of color to develop an academic self-concept. They described validation as a type of affirmation from university personnel for academically unprepared or first-generation students to identify ways to encourage the development of a positive self-concept.

Qualitative Proxies of Validation and their Impact on Student Outcomes

The following section will examine those qualitative studies that have also focused on student validation and its impact on a variety of student intermediate and final outcomes.

Studies Centered on a Sense of Affirmation and Belonging

Suarez (2003) identified factors that contributed to the transfer of community college students to a university from student, counselor, and administrator perspectives. She categorized her findings into three groups: individual, institutional, and environmental. At the individual level, the results revealed that a student's personal drive, a rigorous academic preparation, and a set of educational/career goals resulted in transfer. At the institutional level, validation by faculty/staff, the active presence of role models, institutional flexibility, a view of transfer as a shared responsibility, and active minority support programs contributed to a successful transition from a two-year to a four-year college. Suarez based her study on Rendón's (1994) validation theory and established that support from faculty and staff helped students to develop into successful learners as well as persisters.

In an earlier study by Dodson, Montgomery, and Brown (2009), the authors relied on validation theory to explain the impact of a social support mentoring system for students of color. They defined validation operationally as a source of affirmation for the student's ability to complete academic work and a source of support for academic activities and social inclusion and growth. Using a collective/collaborative group model of peers and faculty, the goal of a mentoring program was to increase the number of students of color academically prepared for high quality doctoral work. The authors found that minority students maintained an average GPA higher than 3.8 and received research scholarships and grants, but

that their likelihood of graduating with an earned doctorate was improved because of the nature of mentoring (or validation) that they received.

Studies Centered on Programmatic/Institutional Efforts and Validation

In an attempt to better understand the impact of a multicultural learning program for TRIO students, Jehangir (2009) focused on issues of isolation and marginalization of first-generation college students. The author relied on the theoretical frameworks by Rendón (1994) and Tinto (1987) to identify specific aspects related to a sense of belonging and academic integration within the curricula and the academy. In their analysis of student experiences through critical pedagogy, five common themes emerged: *finding place*, *finding voice*, *conflict as a catalyst*, *bridge-building* and *transformational learning*. Jahangir (2009) noted that the curriculum and peer interactions in the program promoted the validation of students through the sharing of experiences, which developed a literal and figurative sense of place. The discourse further encouraged student voice while it allowed for critique and meaning-making. In other words, the program's reliance on critical pedagogy, identity, community, and agency allowed students to develop a sense of validation through the curriculum and experiences with peers in the classroom.

Studies Centered on Students of Color and Validation

Martinez Aleman's (2000) qualitative study of sophomore and junior undergraduate women of color concentrated on the role of friendships as learning relationships through inquiry into their topics of conversation and the role that friendship played in their academic development. Martinez Aleman found that friendships for women of color helped to develop a positive self-image, to engage in noncombative and noneducative "race talk," to give and receive academic encouragement and support, and to construct a gendered understanding. The author further noted that her findings extended and mirrored Rendón's (1994) utilization of validation through peer friendships that provide sororal support with intellectual and developmental growth to help advance student success.

Museus and Quayes's (2009) study of undergraduate students of color and the role of campus cultures on their persistence relied on Kuh and Love's (2000) eight cultural propositions (*cultural meaning-making systems*, *precollege cultures*, *cultural distance*, *amount of time in culture of origin*, *extent and intensity of students' connection to programs*, and their *belonging to one or more cultural enclaves for interviews and*

analysis). The authors established that minorities viewed the campus as more culturally homogeneous. Precollege experiences shaped student expectations for diversity. Cultural origin and immersion impacted their ability to navigate the campus culture, and cultural dissonance impacted their cultural adjustment. Moreover, students of color felt pressure to acclimate to the dominant culture, while cultural agents helped to validate their traditional culture, connections to people influenced adjustment, and quality and quantity of relationships with cultural agents validated their cultural identities. These influential relationships with cultural agents, peers, and faculty transformed the students' experience of the campus culture through the emphasis of achievement, value attainment, and validation of their cultural heritage. This represented the author's interpretation of Rendón's (1994) definition of validation, the supportive and confirming process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents to develop academic and social integration.

A Case Study: Mentoring Relationships as a Form of Validating Experiences

The following section is an in-depth case study of how validation is embedded within the interpretation and discussion of the implications for policy and practice among an American Indian¹ secondary school student population. The data gathered for the project consisted of semistructured interviews, focus groups, participant observations, field notes, and memos from students and faculty. The qualitative investigation centered on the development and maintenance of a strong, close relationship between secondary students and faculty. The high school site is a small public school with an enrollment of 184 students (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2007). The high school is located in a rural area very close in proximity to two Native American tribal reservations.

Validation and the Building of Student Relationships

Linking knowledge and cultural experiences in the formation and maintenance of relationships is a central element of validation theory (Rendón, 1994), a fact that is critical for educators to appreciate. American Indian students are more often engaged in faculty/student relationships that are neither validating of who they are as native students nor meaningful to them. These relationships are seldom or never reciprocal or understanding of students. Therefore faculty validation is never fulfilled in the classroom or outside on campus. Quite

¹ *The terms Native American, Indian, Indigenous, and American Indian are used interchangeably, as they are terms commonly used in the Southwest by Native peoples and the Native youth from the project.*

often in educational settings, campus-based policies endorsed by an institution perpetuate an assimilationist structure and agenda.

The focus groups and individual interviews served as a catalyst for students to engage in a conversation about their experiences at the high school. As a result, students critically examined their schooling experience and, in particular, illuminated the policies and learning opportunities offered by the institution. For these students the independent nature in which classroom activities were organized and taught did not foster an opportunity to build relationships with other teachers and their peers or establish a classroom community.

Even at institutions with smaller student populations, which would facilitate the building of relationships between students and faculty, and where relationships would be reciprocal and demonstrated with a commitment and responsibility to each other, American Indian students (self-identified as Pueblo) did not experience any real form of validation in the classroom. For students, the main push for building closer relationships with faculty meant establishing a reciprocal relationship whereby faculty would talk to them and get to know them as a method of building individual relationships and school community (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010; Quijada Cerecer, *in press*). The building of relationships between students and faculty is a form of validation.

Students sought out faculty who would freely share their personal experiences in navigating the successes and challenges in achieving career mobility. One student, William, elaborated:

Unless you ask a teacher, you never hear about a teachers' life, where they live, or how they grew up—I mean, come on, it would be cool to know a little more about their college life ... or what life was like before they went to college.

William and other students continually faced faculty who restricted conversations to the daily lecture or curriculum content. Students were eager to learn more about how faculty identified and lived life. Most participants described faculty as rarely understanding the ways students constructed and embodied relationships with each other. This ideological misunderstanding between faculty and students created a foundation of instances where faculty did not validate students. For example, faculty were unable to understand or problematize the importance

of attending off-campus events for this group of students and their respective communities. Rather than inquiring about the event and using it as a pedagogical moment that would validate the students and their community, faculty chose to critique their students and their respective communities. For American Indian students certain events are symbolic in that they mark an individual, familial, and community accomplishment. Rather than using such events as examples of inappropriate student behavior, faculty could have used those cultural events to affirm students and their respective communities.

Mentoring and Validation

Students rarely identified faculty as mentors. While committed to teaching, according to student narratives, faculty lacked the qualities that are important in building a validating, trusting, or “real” relationship. When asked to describe a mentor, a student said the following: “A person who shares their personal experiences and who makes me think about things differently . . . someone who gives me advice but yet listens to how I am feeling about it.” Other students described a mentor as an individual who is “trustworthy, loyal, and honest.” One participant defined a mentor as someone who shared his or her experiences. When asked to name a mentor and/or role model, all but one participant immediately named a family member, thus reinforcing how disconnected students felt from faculty in educational settings. Despite this disconnect, many students persisted in their attempts to seek out faculty who would serve as mentors for them. Students yearned for faculty to share personal and professional stories that demonstrated some of the challenges each had endured, giving the students a sense of validation and commitment to their educational goals.

Community Building and Validation

Students indicated a desire for activities that would validate who they were as American Indian students, yet also build community between students and faculty (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010; Quijada Cerecer, in press). For example, several students mentioned community-building events that had occurred in years past, events that validated the students’ accomplishments, were engaging, and built community among students, faculty, and the community. Adrien shared the following:

They changed our award assembly. It used to be at night but they changed it to the day. Now my parents and family can’t attend because they work. I was mad about this, you know, because I worked hard to get good grades, and now my family couldn’t be there to see me receive the award.

For Adrien the awards assembly was an important event that provided a space to honor her parents and her work. This change reinforced how the administration at this high school viewed merit as an individual process. To avoid an epistemological disconnect—such as when an institution values individual merits but where individual merits for indigenous students are directly linked to communal merits—specific transformative training must be provided so that faculty can come to understand the value of validation in different forms. This study illuminates how educational institutions should consider even the scheduling of events that do not validate the students and their respective families. Over time, these instances need to be reexamined and recreated so as to establish a validating classroom experience for all students.

The Need for Extension and Specificity

Based on the review of existing literature and discussions of what researchers have found and implied regarding the validation of students on our campuses, there is still a significant need to extend the conceptualization of student validation into different realms that have not been explored. At the same time, there is a need to bring some more definitive operationalization to the construct of validation and invalidation through the identification of specific indicators of validation as well as through different methodological perspectives.

There is still a significant need to extend the conceptualization of student validation into realms that have not been explored.

Prominent in the discussion of validation is the focus on the academic and social openness and thoughtful interaction between faculty and students in the classroom. This discussion illustrates the benefits that can be derived when faculty acknowledge and reward student perspectives and realities. This pedagogical approach creates increased opportunities for the development of student self-concept, positive involvement of significant others and peers, validation of cultural identities, and the creation of a sense of belonging on campus. All of these validation proxies serve to operationalize how and why students who lack the social and academic preparation for postsecondary success decide to persist and, in turn, build the potential to navigate through barriers to graduation. A combination of newer methodological approaches and diverse conceptualizations of validation would advance our understanding of how student validation contributes to important student outcomes such as persistence and student success.

Proposed Quantitative Extensions

Capturing the role of a “validating agent” such as a faculty member in the classroom could illuminate the interactive process between student and faculty within statistical models. The focus on the interaction between the student and validating agent could empirically extend current conceptualizations of validation and help to better operationally define the phenomenon. Current quantitative views on validation have mostly focused on the development of self-worth and academic gains on the part of the student. Not included in that affirmation viewpoint are how support systems (i.e. faculty in the classroom) or how an array of significant others (i.e. faculty, parent, friend, counselor) perceive their roles as validating agents. For example, little is known about faculty who value experiential knowledge while at the same time build a support climate for students. Conceivably, nested faculty and student models would add to our understanding of a true validating experience. More current and sophisticated statistical techniques such as hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) and multilevel structural equation models, capable of testing nested models, could provide a more holistic perspective of the underlying structural patterns among multiple indicators of validation, predictor variables, and outcomes of interest. These nested models of student and faculty attitudes, behaviors, and perceived support networks could more accurately capture and assess the validation taking place between faculty and students.

Additionally, measures of complex constructs such as validation are often very difficult to operationally define, leading to the misspecification of quantitative models, ultimately resulting in findings that do not contribute significantly to our understanding of the phenomenon.² Multiple measures of student and faculty perceptions of validation examined with latent class analysis could describe different types of students and mentors within the validation process. These quantitative research methodologies can be utilized to better clarify and

² To exemplify this point from a theoretical perspective, a broad framework from the literature on leadership provides an example of how it can be applied to validation. Rost (1993) divided leadership definitions into two eras: the industrial paradigm and the postindustrial paradigm. According to Rost, leadership is “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p.102). He further explains that this interaction between leaders and follower is multidirectional and noncoercive. In addition, followers are active in the process of leadership, and more than one leader and follower typically exist.

Based on Rost’s (1993) definition, the relationship between validating agents and students mirrors that of leadership, wherein real changes include validation toward an outcome (i.e. persistence) as a mutual purpose. Although validating agents have more resources, and therefore more influence, to support the student’s success in college, the student must play an active role in shaping how those intended changes take place, while at the same time recognizing that not all students have the social capital to exercise their agency to negotiate these changes. In addition, students also have connections to other students, who can assume the role of validating agents (Nora & Crisp, 2005).

investigate the contribution of validation toward such important educational issues as student persistence and accomplishment.

Proposed Qualitative Extensions

While quantitative research on validation has emphasized students as the preferred unit of analysis, qualitative research has concentrated its focus on institutions (i.e. intervention programs), their roles (i.e. learning communities), and their impact on validating undergraduate students. The majority of these qualitative studies can be classified as interpretive studies conducted through interviews and observations. However, to better illustrate the process, experience, and practice of validation, rigorous case studies, narrative-based inquiries, and ethnographic studies should be utilized. Required within such in-depth case studies would be a history of the institution or program, a document analysis, participant interviews, and a measure of change over time. Narrative-based approaches could provide a more thorough investigation of the experiences of faculty members as they incorporate a practice of validation both inside the classroom and outside on campus. Finally, a smaller form of ethnography that includes interviews and participatory observations focused on the impact of ethnicity and class would incorporate additional student and faculty information to learn the cultural interactions between students and validating agents. These qualitative methodological approaches could extend the knowledge base on validation by illustrating more specific inquiries that better represent concepts or current issues regarding validation theory.

What is more, specific procedures and research designs within qualitative approaches serve to increase the validity and overall significance of the data collected. As previously noted, a focus on the metrics within a qualitative study in the form of pre- and post-interviews measures the amount of validation gained within a period of time. In this way, researchers will be more likely to extract definitions of validation from the themes that emerge from the narratives.

Concluding Remarks

Both quantitative and qualitative researchers have begun to extend and stipulate the current understanding and measurement of validation. Much more is now known than when Rendón (1994) first introduced the concept. However, since the concept of validation is based on an individual's experience

and perceptions, there is a need to consider the degree of fluidity that must be maintained in those studies. For example, careful construction of survey items derived from interviews or focus groups as well as follow-up interviews of participants with too much specificity would only represent the pilot group. While identifying specific measures and items is helpful in understanding the concept of validation, it is important to keep in mind that the perceptions of the individual participant should still be represented. The notion of methodological positionality is important in defining validation for participants within a study.

As more and more questions are now focused on issues related to student success in higher education, every bit of information that addresses issues of equity and diversity on topics as important as student engagement, persistence, academic achievement, and degree attainment is helpful and worth exploring. To that end, current findings from studies focusing on the validation of students in the classroom and on campus have been helpful in linking the validation of students with the student outcomes previously noted. These are suggested quantitative and qualitative procedures and methods can be used to enhance our insight of validation and how it is, and should be, practiced on our campuses.

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Quantitative Measures of Students' Sense of Validation: Advancing the Study of Diverse Learning Environments

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Abstract

The study of students' sense of validation holds promise for understanding college student retention and success, but more research is needed regarding the generalizability and use of the concept. The development of quantitative measures can help facilitate use across student populations in multiple types of institutions of higher education. The present study empirically examines two validation constructs, student perceptions of academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation, in a new nationally available instrument, the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey. Construct validity and cross-validation tests indicate that survey items tap into these latent factors for students of color and White students, and that students of color perceive lower levels of both forms of validation compared to White students. These factors and survey items may be used in future research to examine the relationship between validation, student experiences, and educational outcomes.

Introduction

President Obama has recently emphasized the importance of attaining a college degree, stating that by 2020, this nation will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). Advancing the success of diverse college students has seen renewed interest among various states whose sagging economies have become

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more dependent on a college-educated workforce. For example, studies in California have noted that increases in the number of college graduates will result in increases in state revenues (Brady, Hout, & Stiles, 2005). At the same time, two- and four-year institutions that are broadly accessible have highly mobile student populations. Many students leave without degrees in hand, and national studies show that approximately half of all undergraduates attend more than one postsecondary institution (McCormick, 2003; Peter & Cataldi, 2005). This new national goal, coupled with renewed state interest and institutional focus on improving student success rates, suggests a reexamination of practice and research focused on encouraging retention and degree completion. Such approaches must be directed not only toward students from underrepresented communities entering college for the first time, but also toward students reentering higher education for advancement in the workforce.

While student engagement and involvement has been linked with retention (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1987), monitoring actual engagement in specific academic and social activities is not enough, because students attending broad-access institutions may be constrained by work and family commitments. It is important to understand how students' internal sense of validation indicates whether the educational environment is inclusive and whether staff and faculty proactively empower students for success. The first step, however, is to utilize an emergent theme of validation developed from qualitative studies to create measures that may be useful for both researchers and educators wishing to improve the probability of student reenrollment and degree attainment. In obtaining new measures of validation, our goal is to encourage more use of the concept to understand its utility in meeting new national, state, and institutional goals. Student articulation and reports of validation in college have received limited research attention, and only one recorded study to date has attempted to measure and quantify the concept (Barnett, 2006). In quantifying measures, we hope to attain some level of generalizability of the concept across diverse students in different college environments. More importantly, our goal is to enable educators to improve their capacity for timely assessment of student experiences in order to study their effect on reenrollment and student success. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine the concept of student validation through the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey, a new national instrument available through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP).

Key Studies and Related Concepts

The importance of validating experiences in the postsecondary success of historically underrepresented students first emerged in the Transition to College Project (Terenzini et al., 1994). Subsequently, Rendón (1994) fully articulated the concept of validation in a key article examining how historically underrepresented students are empowered to become successful college students. Rendón (1994) defines validation as “an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). Validation is comprised of several elements that can occur across multiple contexts within an institution. Specifically, validation occurs when an individual within an institution takes an active interest in students and takes the initiative to reach out to them. Students feel capable of learning and valued at their institution when validation occurs as a result of recognition by faculty and staff or institutional agents who are actively inclusive. As such, validation serves as a prerequisite for development and involvement for many students who are learning to navigate postsecondary environments, and remains part of the developmental process throughout a college student’s experience.

Rendón (1994) further describes two types of validation, academic and interpersonal, both of which can occur inside and outside of the classroom. Actions initiated by individuals within a student’s life are an essential component of both types of validation. Academic validation represents actions that foster academic development. Several faculty actions within a classroom characterize academic validation. For example, faculty who show genuine concern for students, create learning opportunities that empower students, extend opportunities to work individually with students, and provide meaningful feedback are all elements of in-class academic validation. Validation also exists beyond academic development. Interpersonal validation represents actions that promote the personal and social adjustment both within the curricular and cocurricular contexts of an institution. Collectively, academic and interpersonal validation are components of a holistic student development model.

Although the body of empirical literature on the effects of validation on educational outcomes is limited, research indicates that validation positively impacts the postsecondary success of historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and community college students (Barnett, 2006; Rendón, 2002).

Rendón (2002) found several examples of academic and interpersonal validation within Puente, a highly successful community college academic support program in California. Faculty, mentors, and counselors actively reached out to Puente students and incorporated pedagogical practices that valued the personal experiences of students. Through their affirming interactions with these institutional agents, Latina/o community college students in a Puente English class gained confidence in their academic skills, enabling them to gain confidence in other classes. Validation is important in the persistence of community college students (Barnett, 2006; Rendón 1994, 2002). Higher levels of validation are positively related to students' intent to persist and their sense of integration. Barnett (2006) found four distinct constructs that she identified as faculty validation for community college students. Each of these constructs had modest to significant relationships to students' intentions to persist and sense of integration. Given that the majority of community college students commute to campus, classroom interactions are of particular interest for their academic and social integration.

Most research on validation utilizes qualitative methods to capture the processes through which this core concept influences student experiences and outcomes. However, new conceptual models for guiding analyses of student persistence and degree attainment (Holmes et al., 2002; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005) include validating academic and social experiences as key predictors. Previous research is also limited on the influence of validation among students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds attending a wide variety of institutions. The influence of validation on the postsecondary success of students attending four-year institutions, especially those with many mobile students, has not been explored. Furthermore, a major limitation of this research is that it has been conducted in community college English classes, which raises questions regarding the generalizability of the concept across institutional contexts and students enrolled in coursework throughout an institution. Using common quantitative measures of validation allows for examining the phenomenon across students in many disciplines and institutional types. Barnett's (2006) study provides a valuable example of the utility of quantitative measures in extending the qualitative research on validation and key student outcomes. However, the findings from this work are limited for several reasons. The validation constructs are representative of students at one community college, so research with samples of

students from other types of institutions is necessary. Although faculty validation is extremely important, especially for students whose engagement primarily occurs within the classroom, Barnett's (2006) measures only represent validation by faculty and do not examine the process with other actors in the institution. The literature consistently indicates the importance of faculty in the academic success of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); nonetheless, it is important to take into account how other institutional agents also play an important role in enhancing students' sense of validation. Students frequently interact with staff across various campus departments and offices, and in some instances, with administrators. All of these individuals have the potential to engage in student-centered practices. We aim to develop quantitative measures of validation that assess the levels of academic validation that students experience within the classroom as well as a more general measure of interpersonal validation that results from contact with both staff and faculty.

Methodology

Data Source and Sample

The data source for this study was derived from the pilot administration of the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The DLE contains a number of new constructs, including the validation measures examined in this study. Data were collected between December 2009 and May 2010 at three community colleges, six public four-year institutions, and five private four-year institutions across the United States. Broad-access institutions and structurally diverse selective universities were included to expand the scope of institutions and students featured in higher education research. The DLE administration targeted students with substantial familiarity with their respective campuses in order to capture their perceptions of the climate for diversity. Accordingly, institutions were instructed to assess students who had earned 24 units or more at the community college and students in the second and third years at four-year institutions, including transfer students; some four-year institutions surveyed students in their first and fourth or more years as well. The DLE was administered online, resulting in a 34% average response rate based on students who accessed the survey from notification emails.

The sample is inclusive of students beyond the historically “traditional” college-going population. The final sample size was 4,472 after removing unusable cases, and was composed of 466 freshmen, 1,564 sophomores, 1,413 juniors, and 1,029 seniors based on self-reported class standing. The composition of the final sample was 0.7% Arab American/Arab ($n = 31$), 14.2% Asian American/Asian ($n = 636$), 4.4% Black ($n = 197$), 18.1% Latina/o ($n = 809$), 0.8% Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native ($n = 34$), 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n = 8$), 42.4% White/Caucasian ($n = 1,898$), and 19.2% students who indicated two or more monoracial/monoethnic backgrounds ($n = 859$). Accordingly, the aggregated group of students of color comprised 57.6% of the final sample ($n = 2,574$). The mean income range was \$40,000–\$49,999, but was lower for students of color and higher for White students. The mean age was 24.8 years with minimal difference between groups, and includes students through age seventy-nine. Almost two-thirds were first-generation college students when defined by parental educational attainment, and about 40% did not enter their current institution as first-time, full-time freshman. In sum, the sample captures diverse students as intended.

Measures

This study draws upon the existing research and tests quantitative measures for two hypothesized latent factors, academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation. Central to these two concepts are educators’ actions that express interest in students’ academic development and success and that facilitate students’ incorporation into the campus (Rendón, 1994). However, latent factors, such as validation, cannot be directly measured (Bollen, 1989); accordingly, we developed a variety of measures hypothesized to capture dimensions of a students’ sense of validation based on the literature. All measures are student self-reports, which have been shown to be accurate measures and are widely used in educational research (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). See Table 1 for a complete description of the survey items and results of the study.

Data Analysis

We followed Byrne’s (2008) sequence for construct validation to examine if the DLE items accurately measure validation for both students of color and White undergraduates. We created these two groups for analysis because the concept of validation has been built upon the experiences of students of color (Rendón,

1994; Terenzini et al., 1994), and a synthesis of studies on racial climate indicate differential perceptions based on racial/ethnic group (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). First, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were examined for normality in distribution. Pearson correlations were then examined for strong relationships between the variables hypothesized to measure the two distinct latent factors (Harman, 1976).

Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted in EQS software separately for students of color and White students. Factor analysis in general explains the correlations or covariances between observed variables and unobserved latent factors (Bollen, 1989). In conducting CFA, we specified a model with latent factors hypothesized to fit the data and then used the technique to confirm the model; therefore the technique required some a priori knowledge about the data structure and is appropriate for measures developed from a strong theoretical foundation (Bollen, 1989; Bryne, 2008). Several model fit indices together indicated whether or not the data fit the hypothesized factor structure and measurement, with cutoffs for the comparative fit index (CFI) close to .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) close to .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and the normed fit index (NFI) close to .95 (Bentler & Bonnett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999). To test the hypothesized model, the covariance matrix for each group was analyzed using robust maximum likelihood (ML) estimation, which corrected for nonnormality in the data (Yuan & Bentler, 2007). The hypothesized models were adjusted based on model fit and statistical modification indices coupled with theoretical justification. Following these steps, CFA was run in each separate group first to test the factor structure of each of the validation factors independently, and then a two-factor higher order construct model was run in which the factors covaried, again for each group to establish baseline models.

Once baseline models for each group were confirmed, equality constraints were tested simultaneously using EQS across the two groups. Invariance across groups is important because it confirms that survey items are accurate measures in subgroups of a sample or population (Jöreskog, 1971; Brown, 2006). In this process, factor reliability and loadings are calculated for each group, whereas fit indices are calculated only for the overall model across both groups. The first step was to test for configural invariance to examine the basic factor structure. Next, measurement invariance in the two-group CFA examined the equality of factor loadings and measurement error variances and covariances. Partial

measurement invariance was tested when full invariance was not confirmed across groups by releasing constraints between errors and between factors and variables (Byrne, 2008). In each of these substeps, fit indices and statistical modification indices guided theoretically sound model modification. The final model for partial measurement invariance was confirmed by calculating the change in the Satorra-Bentler Chi-Square for robust ML (Satorra & Bentler, 2001) between the previous and final models and confirming the change was not significant (see also Byrne, 2008). Finally, mean scores for the two groups were tested to determine if students of color and White students perceived different levels of academic or general interpersonal validation.

Limitations

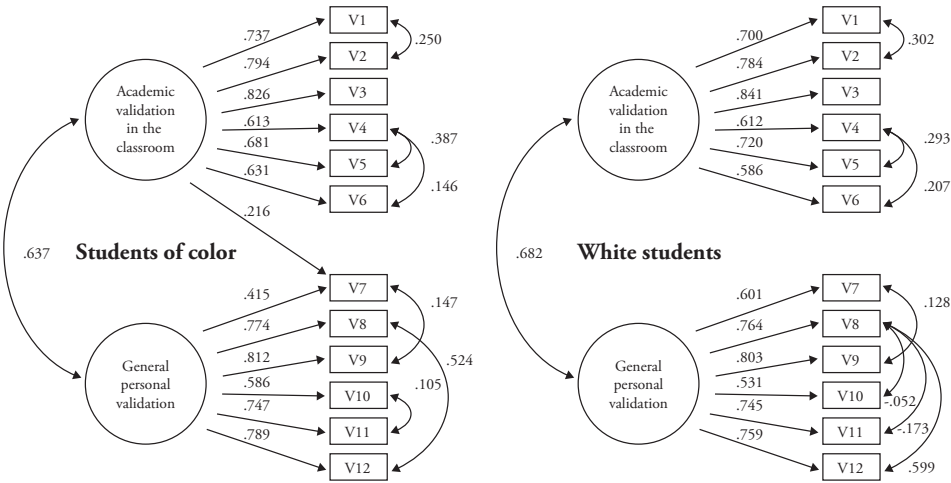
Limitations of this study include aspects of the analysis and instrument. Perhaps most prominent is that the present study does not disaggregate students of color into their respective racial and ethnic groups for the group comparisons. However, this was justified in order to retain the most underrepresented students in the analysis (e.g. Arab, Black, and American Indian). Second, the DLE items do not disaggregate validation measures for staff and faculty; compromises were made due to space constraints and aims to create the most parsimonious factors on a national instrument. Finally, while survey research enables measurement of student perceptions across many institutions, it does not allow observation of the process. Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on students' sense of validation and is a strong foundation for advancing assessment of the concept on a national level.

Results

Two-Factor Baseline Models for Students of Color and White Students

Results for the development of two-factor hierarchical baseline models are presented separately for each sample group along with standardized coefficients in Figure 1. The circles represent each of the two separate latent factors, and the squares denote the observable variables (survey measures). The unidirectional arrows point from the factors to variables, illustrating that the underlying latent factors generate the measurable traits. The bidirectional arrow between the latent factors shows a hypothesized correlation between the two validation latent constructs. In addition, Table 1 displays the unstandardized parameter estimates and unique variances for the baseline models for students of color and White students.

FIGURE 1 | Standardized Estimates of Two-Factor Baseline Models for Students of Color and White Students



Students of Color

The initial model for academic validation in the classroom did not include correlated error terms, and fit indices showed the model fit could be improved (Satorra-Bentler [S-B] $\chi^2 = 396.2975$; $df = 9$, $p < .001$; CFI = .926; NFI = .925; RMSEA = .129). The LaGrange Multiplier (LM) univariate tests were examined to include theoretically sound paths that could improve the model fit. With the two additional paths, the final model for academic validation in the classroom provided a strong representation of this latent factor (S-B $\chi^2 = 27.2000$; $df = 6$, $p < .001$; CFI = .990; NFI = .995; RMSEA = .037) with a high reliability ($\alpha = .866$). Similarly, the first model for general interpersonal validation did not include correlated error terms and robust goodness-of-fit results were not adequate (S-B $\chi^2 = 353.3576$; $df = 9$, $p < .001$; CFI = .933; NFI = .931; RMSEA = .122). Three paths between significant error terms were subsequently added based on these tests. The final model for general interpersonal validation for students of color was strong (S-B $\chi^2 = 58.0873$; $df = 6$, $p < .001$; CFI = .990; NFI = .989; RMSEA = .058) and had high reliability ($\alpha = .868$).

Building on the independent results of each factor model, the initial two-factor model for students of color in which the factors covary fit the data (S-B $\chi^2 = 321.9652$; $df = 47$, $p < .001$; CFI = .977; NFI = .973; RMSEA = .048). However, LM univariate tests were examined to potentially improve the model, given that two standardized residuals exceeded the .10 threshold. Interestingly, the LM univariate tests indicated a cross-loading relationship between the faculty empowerment item (V7) in the general interpersonal validation factor and the academic validation in the classroom factor. The path between this item and the academic validation factor was included in the next model given the theoretical justification of this relationship. The robust goodness-of-fit indices indicated a strong fit for the final baseline two-factor model with the cross-loading relationship (S-B $\chi^2 = 269.4386$; $df = 46$, $p < .001$; CFI = .981; NFI = .978; RMSEA = .044), with the correlation between the factors at .637. These findings indicate that the hypothesized validation factors fit the data for students of color with the addition of the cross-loading variable.

TABLE 1 | Unstandardized Parameter Estimates in Baseline Models for Students of Color and White Students

Latent factor/Items and variable label	Students of color		White students	
	b	Error variance	b	Error variance
F1: Academic validation in the classroom ^a				
V1: Instructors were able to determine my level of understanding of the course material	1.000	.675	1.000	.715
V2: Instructors provided me with feedback that helped me judge my progress	2.306	.607	1.174	.620
V3: I feel like my contributions were valued in class	2.014	.564	1.326	.541
V4: Instructors encouraged me to meet with them after or outside of class	1.768	.790	1.127	.791
V5: Instructors encouraged me to ask questions and participate in discussions	2.045	.732	1.079	.694
V6: Instructors showed concern about my progress	2.291	.776	1.227	.810
V7: Faculty empower me to learn here	.216	.817	--	--
F2: General interpersonal validation ^b				
V7: Faculty empower me to learn here	1.000	.817	1.000	.799
V8: At least one staff member has taken an interest in my development	1.111	.633	1.616	.645
V9: Faculty believe in my potential to succeed academically	1.169	.583	1.375	.596
V10: Staff encourage me to get involved in campus activities	1.051	.811	1.159	.848
V11: Staff recognize my achievements	.981	.665	1.441	.667
V12: At least one faculty member has taken an interest in my development	1.147	.614	1.540	.651

^a Five-point scale: From very often = 5 to never = 1
^b Four-point scale: From strongly agree = 4 to strongly disagree = 1

White Students

The initial model for White students' academic validation in the classroom indicated that it could be improved (S-B $\chi^2 = 255.2941$; df = 9; p < .001; CFI = .933, NFI = .931, RMSEA = .120). Modification tests indicated three paths between theoretically justified error terms that were added in three stages to derive a stronger final model (S-B $\chi^2 = 6.442$; df = 6; p > .376; CFI = 1.000, NFI = .998,

RMSEA = .006); the reliability was also high ($\alpha = .858$). Similarly, for general interpersonal validation, the initial model was not a good fit without correlated error terms (S-B $\chi^2 = 325.886$; $df = 9$; $p < .001$; CFI = .912; NFI = .910; RMSEA = .136). Four paths between theoretically justified error terms were individually added and significantly improved the model fit. The final general interpersonal validation model for White students provides a strong representation of the relationship between items and this latent factor (S-B $\chi^2 = 42.083$; $df = 5$; $p < .001$; CFI = .990, NFI = .988, RMSEA = .063), which also has high reliability ($\alpha = .854$). Again, building on the independent results of each factor model, the initial two-factor model for White students had correlation between the factors at .682, and provided a strong representation of the latent validation factors (S-B $\chi^2 = 236.131$; $df = 46$; $p < .001$; CFI = .977, NFI = .972, RMSEA = .047). This means that the data for White students strongly matches the conceptualized relationship between the items and the factor onto which they load.

These baseline measures for students of color and White students demonstrate successful development of quantitative indicators that empirically represent Rendón's (1994) conceptualization of validation, which can be used to assess how much validation students feel they receive at an institution. Confirmatory factor analyses reveal that the DLE items statistically represent latent factors of academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation. The action-oriented nature of the items captures the central premise of validation, which is that institutional agents can engage in student-centered behaviors that enhance a sense of validation among students. The six items relating to how much students perceive that instructors actively reach out, engage them within the classroom, and recognize students' progress parsimoniously assess academic validation in the classroom. Similarly, general interpersonal validation can be measured by a six-item set related to their perceptions of how faculty and staff have reached out to them and expressed interest in their development. Furthermore, perceptions of general interpersonal validation and academic validation in the classroom are highly interrelated. Students who report high levels of validation in the classroom are also likely to report high levels of general interpersonal validation. It is important to note we have identified that students' sense of validation is a function of their experiences with faculty and staff, which can be used to assess many activities and interactions on campus, including mentoring, participation in academic support programs, and pedagogies of inclusion in diverse learning environments.

Test of Invariance of the Configural Model Across Groups

The separate two-factor models for students of color and White students served as the baseline models from which to test for invariance across groups. The separate analyses for students of color and White students indicate that the items for both interpersonal and academic validation in the classroom strongly represent these constructs. The next stage of analysis examined if the common factor structures across both groups were equivalent in the two-factor models. A test of invariance of this configural model for both groups provided evidence to the equivalence of the factor structures, and the first model required no modification ($S-B \chi^2 = 502.6991$; $df = 92$, $p < .001$; CFI = .980; NFI = .975; RMSEA = .045). These results indicate that the common items equivalently comprise both factors for both samples of students. Table 2 summarizes the fit indices for tests of invariance of the configural measurement models across groups following the procedural steps articulated in Byrne (2008).

TABLE 2 | Tests for Invariance of Factorial Structure and Item Measurements Across Groups

Model tested	CFI	NFI	RMSEA	S-B χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$	Δdf
Model 1 (configural)	.980	.975	.045	502.70	92	--	--
Model 2 (measurement) Invariance of factor loadings, measurement error variances- covariances					.607	1.174	.620
Model 3 (partial measurement) Invariance of factor covariances and release of error variances- covariances of V3, F1; V11, F2; E4,E5	.978	.972	.044	557.83	107	55.13	15

Test of Invariance of the Measurement Model Across Groups

Next, tests of the measurement model, which first examine the equality of factor loadings and error variances-covariances, indicate a good model fit ($S-B \chi^2 = 557.8289$; $df = 107$, $p < .001$; CFI = .978; NFI = .972; RMSEA = .044). However, incremental univariate χ^2 values in the LM tests show that three paths in the model were significantly different ($p < .05$) between both samples. Two of the differences involved factor loadings V11 (“Staff recognize my achievements”) and V3 (“I feel like my contributions were valued in class”) and an error covariance between E4 and E5, whose items relate to the amount of encouragement that instructors provide for asking questions or meeting outside of class. Provided

these differences in the model, a partial measurement invariance test was run to examine the equivalence of covariance between both validation factors for both groups after removing the statistically significant paths (Byrne, 2008). The results represent a strong model fit (S-B $\chi^2 = 536.6950$; $df = 105$, $p < .001$; CFI = .979; NFI = .973; RMSEA = .043). The change in the Satorra-Bentler Chi-Square from this model to the original one was not significant, which confirmed further modification was unnecessary. Beyond the differences identified on two factor loadings and one covariance among error terms, the two-factor model of students' sense of validation are equivalent across both groups. The cross validation results of the configural model across both groups confirm that the same sets of items measure these types of validation for students of color and White students. As such, these items collectively measure the level of validation that students feel they are receiving at the institution.

Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney Test for Difference in Means

We performed a Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, which is akin to a t-test, but is specific for noninterval variables that are not normally distributed (DePuy, Berger, & Zhou, 2005). We created rescaled factors, with a range of 0 to 100 and mean of 50, which were weighted based on factor loadings produced in the confirmatory factor analysis. Test results indicated that White students' mean score for academic validation in the classroom was significantly higher than that for students of color ($z = -3.80$, $p < .001$). Similarly, results for general interpersonal validation was also significantly higher for White students than students of color ($z = -1.97$, $p < .05$). Interestingly, differences in mean scores were more significant for academic validation in the classroom. These findings suggest that White students and students of color experience different levels of validation, with students of color generally reporting lower levels of academic validation in the classroom and general interpersonal validation.

Discussion and Implications

Validation has emerged as an important concept for the academic success of underrepresented groups in higher education. This study establishes new measures and shows that a sense of validation can be assessed across two-year, public and private, selective, and broad-access four-year institutions, and also among White students. Although the validation measures have construct

validity across both students of color and White students, it remains important to understand differences in validation that might exist between groups.

Overall, the cross-validation tests show that the DLE survey items represent two validation constructs that are part of a higher order factor model across both groups. However, notable differences exist between the groups. For example, for students of color, the item related to feeling empowered by faculty to learn is directly related to the academic validation they report in the classroom as well as their general interpersonal sense of validation. Although the interrelatedness of this item and both factors are theoretically grounded, this relationship for White students is not observed. In addition, differences in mean scores indicate that students of color report lower levels of validation than White students, with a more stark difference in academic validation in the classroom. These results suggest that students of color and White students experience validation differently at their institutions, which is consistent with previous research on classroom experiences for underrepresented students. For example, Cabrera and

*Classroom experiences
strongly influence
underrepresented students'
general perceptions
of the institution.*

Nora (1994) found that African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans were more likely than White students to feel isolated from class discussion and singled out in class. These negative classroom experiences significantly affected the alienation that students generally

felt at their institutions. Furthermore, prejudiced faculty and staff indirectly influenced the alienation students felt, given the strong correlation of these individuals with negative classroom experiences in their study. Thus, classroom experiences strongly influence underrepresented students' general perceptions of the institution. The strong relationship between validating classroom experiences and students feeling generally empowered by faculty at the institution therefore makes sense for students of color. Invariance tests also showed differences across groups in how items measuring whether students feel like their contributions were valued in class (academic validation) and whether or not staff recognize their achievements (general interpersonal validation) contribute to validation. These differences speak to the level of inclusiveness that students report and how this contributes to their own sense of feeling valued in the college environment.

Implications for Research and Practice

The development of new validation constructs in this study has several implications for institutional assessment, higher education research, and the improvement of campus practices. Given the construct validity of general interpersonal validation and academic validation in the classroom on the DLE survey, institutions may consider utilizing these parsimonious item sets to examine the extent to which students feel validated in their postsecondary experience. These items will now be available nationally as part of HERI's Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) suite of surveys designed for longitudinal assessment. The DLE instrument was designed to assess the campus climate for diversity, educational practices, and student learning outcomes, as national surveys currently lack this multifaceted approach (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). The DLE targets students in their second and third years of college and community college students who have earned a modest amount of credits at a single institution, although it can be used to assess undergraduates at all levels and institutional types. Primary outcomes featured in the DLE include habits of mind and skills for life-long learning, competencies for multicultural living, and achievement and student mobility measures (Hurtado, Cuellar, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, & Arellano, 2009). Additional outcomes can be measured by linking the DLE to other survey and institutional data on retention. Institutional researchers can then locally examine how levels of validation influence college experiences and outcomes for students by linking these factors with other assessment data. Advancing student success will require more information about the college environment and how students experience it; these measures of validation capture faculty and staff efforts to be student-centered and inclusive.

Validation is an action-oriented process that involves interactions between students and institutional agents. Through quantitative analyses of validation, institutional researchers may be able to more quickly assess student experiences to anticipate the likelihood of reenrollment and other college outcomes. These data can be presented to faculty, staff, and counselors to reflect on student experiences on campus and increase awareness about creating more inclusive practices in diverse environments. However, we also recommend that institutions spend time identifying the key institutional agents that assist in student success to understand their practices and interactions with students. This can be done using survey data as a first step using qualitative methods to observe interactions or tapping into students' social networks

to identify key institutional agents and units that result in successful navigation of the college environment. Identifying exemplars and key practices that result in increasing students' validation in the environment may be a key element in improving overall retention rates.

Rendón (1994) noted the importance of validation for underrepresented students, or a conclusion further substantiated in the present study. Although validation can be measured through the same items for White students and students of color, significant differences in the way that validation is experienced exists across both groups. Careful consideration should be placed on further examination of how validation may be experienced differently in various subpopulations of students in different types of institutions. Since institutions differ in their racial and ethnic compositions, it will be extremely important to consider how underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in diverse educational environments experience validation. Similarly, research should examine how students from other underrepresented social identity groups experience validation and how it impacts student success. The application of validation as a framework may shed light on ways to reduce the marginalization and educational inequities faced by other populations such as low-income students, part-time students, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities.

The use of validation measures shifts the focus from student behaviors such as engagement (or lack of engagement) to how students experience the learning environment and to improvements that can be made in how educators shape student experiences. Increasing degree attainment remains a key focus of local, state, and national efforts. Understanding the validating experiences of diverse student populations can provide valuable knowledge for the development of learning environments that empower all students to succeed and achieve their educational goals.

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Toward a Neo-Critical Validation Theory: Participatory Action Research and Mexican Migrant Student Success

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Abstract

The success of nondominant students in higher education can be strengthened when students' contributions and participation in the institution are valued and seen as important to the college environment. Rendón's (1994) theory of validation stands as a centerpiece in the scholarship that seeks to understand, explain, and support the academic achievement of nondominant students. Drawing on experiences with a participatory action project cofounded by 12 Mexican migrant students and one university researcher, this article describes how Freire's concept of critical consciousness can help incorporate struggles of power, agency, and identity into the validation work described by Rendón. A neo-critical theory of validation is put forward as a means to extend Rendón's theory by incorporating the sociopolitical context of nondominant students' participation in higher education.

Mexican (im)migrant families and their students are among the most marginalized groups in the United States. Deeply implicated in America's agricultural, economic, and immigration policies, the livelihoods and opportunities of Mexican (im)migrant students often factor into hotly politicized public discourse. Contemporary debates over federal immigration law and states' rights, such as California's Assembly Bill 540, which extended in-state tuition benefits to undocumented students, and Arizona's State Bill 1070, which deputized state and municipal police forces with immigration enforcement responsibility, are but two examples of recent legislation that foster a turbulent political environment for Mexican (im)migrant students. Yet the political arena is only one source of uncertainty in the lives of these families and their students. They also are subject to economic, educational, and social discrimination across their lived social spheres (Gibson, 2003; Gildersleeve, 2010; Lopez, 2001; Rothenberg, 1998; Wright, 1995; Zalaquett, McHatton, & Cranston-Gringas, 2007). Such discrimination fosters contexts in which Mexican (im)migrant students face marginalization that threatens their success in college.

In response to long-standing concerns over migrant education, *Los Estudiantes Migrantes y Educación* (LEME) was formed as a participatory action research (PAR) collective of 12 first-generation, Mexican (im)migrant college students and one university researcher (article author). As a collective, we work together to understand and give voice to the experiences of Mexican (im)migrant college students. Broadly, LEME-PAR seeks to support Mexican (im)migrant student success. Particularly, LEME-PAR investigates local manifestations of inequality in migrant families' lives and explores how they relate to broader social concerns of educational equity for (im)migrant students (Gildersleeve, Gomez, & Rodriguez, 2009).

Among the myriad findings and theories that have emerged in the research literature about college student success, Rendón's (1994) validation theory stands out as a model of learning and student development that accounts for diverse contextual backgrounds and pays attention to students' holistic college experiences. Incorporating both academic and interpersonal experiences while paying close attention to the role of students' self-efficacy, Rendón's theory has helped researchers make sense of marginalized students' experiences in ways useful for supporting their success in college. However, Rendón's theory of validation does not explicitly engage with issues of power and agency in the lived experiences of underrepresented and/or marginalized college students. Social and political influences on students' collegiate experiences are not explicitly addressed. As such, students' ability to cultivate validation on their own terms could be limited by the dominant practices of the academy—practices that validation work might very well be seeking to subvert.

The purpose of this paper is to report on how the research and action activities of the LEME-PAR might constitute validation in these (im)migrant students' lives. Moreover, this paper highlights how the validation experienced vis a vis the LEME-PAR is markedly political and sociocultural, drawing from key concepts of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 1989). As such, issues of power and agency are made explicit in the validation work of the LEME-PAR. I will argue that the particular validation experienced by the LEME-PAR collective suggests a theory of neo-critical validation—one that explicitly takes up the inequalities faced by migrant students, and seeks to generate critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) toward the goal of college student success.

After a brief review of the contemporary landscape for Mexican (im)migrant students in higher education and a brief discussion of Rendón's validation theory (1994), the background and context of LEME-PAR and its participants will be described in detail. Discussion of the LEME-PAR will then present examples of our research and action activities, drawing on Rendón's theory of validation to explain how the critical consciousness fostered through the LEME-PAR supports students' success. As the focus of this paper and this special issue is the contribution and development of validation theory, implications will be drawn that emphasize how issues of power and agency can be engaged by a neo-critical validation theory, relying heavily on Freire's concept of critical consciousness.

Mexican (Im)migrant Students and Higher Education

The educational experiences of students from migrant farm-working families are generally underresearched. However, some scholars have identified a number of barriers that migrant students face in their precollege contexts. For example, scholars (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Gibson, Bejinez, Hidalgo, & Rolón, 2004; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009) have found that migrant labor contexts conflate with race and class to further disadvantage migrant students in education. Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001) found that migrant parents were more likely to be disenfranchised from meaningful participation in their students' schooling, but when schools took responsibility for fostering positive relationships and meeting families' basic needs, then student achievement increased. Valadez (2008) ethnographically studied the educational decision-making of 12 high-achieving Mexican immigrant students and found that traditional school structures were often in tension with students' cultural understandings of education.

A number of studies have noted that migrant student K–12 academic success relies heavily on school involvement in family life, progressive language policies, and the accessibility of positive mentors (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Gibson & Hidalgo, 2009; 2001; Gutierrez, Arzubaiaga, & Hunter, 2009; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). In my own work, I have ethnographically documented that beyond these social and cultural mediators of academic success, migrant students face institutionalized inequality in college-going (Gildersleeve, 2010). That is, migrant students' college-going, unlike some dominant groups', is not an institutionalized practice, but rather emerges from exceptional practices by key interlocutors.

Despite these barriers and inequalities, some migrant students matriculate into higher education every year. As evidence of this, the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) operates as part of Title I, Part C of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. CAMP serves approximately 2,000 first-year migrant students annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As of July 2009, there were 108 CAMP initiatives across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Nuñez (2009) looked at the college choice outcomes for migrant students in California. Comparing students who participated in an overtly politicized outreach program that relied on sociocultural pedagogies with nonparticipating students, Nuñez noted that students who participated in the outreach program were more likely to apply to more schools and more competitive campuses across the California public higher education sector.

Despite growing attention to migrant students' social contexts and K–12 schooling, little research has focused on the college experiences of migrant students. Zalaquett, McHatton, and Cranston-Gringas (2007) conducted a survey of 52 CAMP participants from across three different cohorts at a metropolitan university. They found that migrant students shared a strong bicultural identity, saw college as a primarily economic/career-enhancing enterprise, and relied on parents for paramount influence in college decisions.

Markedly absent from the landscape of research on migrant students in higher education is any particular attention to their academic achievement, including their persistence and retention. This paper addresses that gap by describing how Mexican migrant students participating in the LEME-PAR experienced validation while cultivating critical consciousness of their sociopolitical conditions in higher education.

Validation in Student Success

For a long time, research on students' achievement in higher education was limited to graduation patterns, dropout prevention, and studies of student retention. Each of these framed student success from an institutional perspective. When retention studies did begin to use individual units of analysis (e.g., students), they became plagued by deficit perspectives of nondominant students' cultural background (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2004). For example, departing Latino students were interpreted as

resultant from inferior academic ability, perhaps brought on by unsupportive home lives and poor academic preparation (Adelman, 1999). In addition, scholarship on student success has long used comparative logic, pitting one arbitrarily chosen group's achievement in comparison with another's to make claims about student ability, cultural background, and academic preparation (Adelman, 1999). These logics of comparison undermine the integrity of any given group's experiences—suggesting that one group's reality only matters in reference and relation to the dominant group's experience.

As critical scholars began to identify this deficit-laden interpretation in the research literature, some scholars were shifting the narrative about nondominant students' retention, arguing that cultural assimilation was the answer to supporting student success (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Others were quick to disagree and proffered more affirmative interpretations of nondominant student struggles in higher education (Nora, & Cabrera, 1993, 1996; Tierney, 1992). These critiques led to new models and again began shifting the available frames for understanding student success. These were the seeds planted to study student persistence.

Meanwhile, scholarship around college student experiences began to theorize about the role that out-of-class experiences and the broader college environment might have on student success (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996). Astin (1984) generated a theory of student involvement that made the logical connection that students who were involved in the institution were more likely to respond positively to its enterprise and therefore achieve greater academic success. However, Astin's theory was based on research that relied heavily on aggregated national data, which had a tendency to overlook the nuances of nondominant students' realities. Not all students could be involved in colleges and universities in the same way, nor to the same extent. Yet colleges and universities, and the people that run them, still needed to address the academic and social needs of nondominant students in order to support their academic success.

In her study of 132 students from across institutional types, Laura Rendón (1994) pieced together another logical conclusion that amended Astin's theory of involvement. Noting how student demographics were changing from predominantly White, middle- and upper-class, well-educated backgrounds to

a more diverse student body with more students of color and first-generation college students, Rendón's data suggested,

What many students related in this study differs from involvement. What had transformed these students were incidents where some individual, either in- or out-of-class, took an active interest in them—when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment. It appears that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. (pp. 43–44)

Rendón's conclusions led her to develop a theory of validation for student development, arguing that nondominant students benefit from a collegiate environment that validates their experiences as learners and knowers. Validation theory afforded another shift in the framing of student success: research could focus on students and seek practical ways to affirm their diverse experiences with the institution.

Rendón (1994) points out that students from underrepresented backgrounds often experience isolation, a lack of self-efficacy, and a lack of a sense of belonging in college contexts. Numerous other researchers have come to similar findings and conclusions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Furthermore, these experiences have been linked to early departure from college and institutional retention issues (Hurtado & Kamimura, 2003; Nora, 1987). In theorizing her concept of validation, Rendón asserted that recognizing students' diverse backgrounds and affirming their experiences can take form as academic and/or interpersonal validation. Academic validation usually comes from in-class activities and stems from academic personnel (i.e., faculty) expressly supporting the academic work, effort, and achievement of nondominant students (Rendón, 1994). Interpersonal validation usually comes from out-of-class activities that recognize and celebrate the social and cultural traditions related to students' backgrounds (Rendón, 1994). The goals of fostering validation in nondominant students are to provide affirmation of their experiences as college students, mitigate isolation, strengthen self-efficacy, and foster a stronger sense of belonging in the college context. It is assumed that these characteristics will afford students greater opportunities to become involved in meaningful ways

in their education, thus supporting their persistence to degree. According to Rendón's theorization of validation, this should be understood as an enabling process that creates self-efficacy. However, validation suggests a developmental process rather than developmental outcomes. It is an ethic of caring that must be practiced in order to be experienced.

Validation theory has been cited repeatedly in studies of student success, suggesting that it affords scholars and practitioners a valuable way to think about serving nondominant students in higher education (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Torres, 2006). Despite the advances made in the study of student success by Rendón's (1994) theory of validation and subsequent studies, nondominant students, in aggregate, continue to struggle in higher education, and faculty and staff continue to struggle to serve nondominant students effectively. Criticalists have argued that contemporary educational activity and inequality cannot be understood as divorced from struggles of power and agency (Baez, 2006; Jaramillo & McLaren, 2008; McLaren & Kincheloe, 1995). Paulo Freire (1970) taught that power and agency are best understood from the lived experiences of those disenfranchised by current power relations. Furthermore, the oppressed must engage in the struggle for equity on their terms, generating their own liberation (Boal, 1979; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008). Thus, I argue that incorporating a more critical perspective of the power relations that shape higher education contexts for nondominant students could strengthen validation theory. And in response, I present a case of validation work, founded on Freirean principles of critical consciousness.

Los Estudiantes Migrantes y Educación—Participatory Action Research Collective

At its most basic element, the LEME-PAR is a learning community focused on conducting critical research and effecting social change toward equity in educational opportunity for migrant communities. Through participation in this dialogic community, I contend that students gained self-efficacy, which includes the students' ability to affirm themselves. Hence, students experienced validation via the LEME-PAR. However, as the LEME-PAR concerns itself with the *critical* study and engagement of educational equity, issues of power and agency become

paramount. Students' interrogation of power and agency generated a critical consciousness, marking their validation as a neo-critical validation: affirmation of their reading of the world and how they write themselves into it.

As noted earlier, the LEME-PAR is a collective of 12 Mexican (im)migrant college students and one university researcher (the author of this article). These 12 students come from across the state of California, as far north as the San Francisco Bay Area, and as far south as the Imperial Valley along the *Baja California* and Arizona borders. During the time of our engagement together, three students attended a University of California campus, five students attended a California State University campus, three students attended a California community college, and one student attended an Ivy League university. As the project's principal investigator, I was working full-time as an assistant professor at Iowa State University. All thirteen participants met in the summer of 2005 during the UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute (see Gildersleeve, 2009b), which was a precollege outreach program funded by migrant education funds. Since that time, the students and I engaged in a critical ethnographic study of migrant student college-going (Gildersleeve, 2010) that then evolved into the participatory action research project described here.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a research tradition that draws from interdisciplinary methodologies that share a common commitment to social justice and equity. As such, definitions of PAR vary across research contexts and purposes. Yet most PAR projects can be understood as working from a common core of principles that include collaboration, critical reflection, action benefitting participants, and the goal of addressing a social problem (McIntyre, 2008). Among the manifold outcomes that PAR can produce, Cammarota and Fine (2008) suggest that *youth* participatory action research in particular is explicitly pedagogical and "a prime methodology ... for preparing and engaging youth in democratic processes as well as providing young people with a systematic way to analyze the oppressive circumstances within various institutional settings" (p. 8). Ascribing to these core principles and desiring such critical outcomes as described by Cammarota and Fine (2008), the LEME-PAR engages in rigorous social research that requires critical reflection and leads to social action addressing educational injustices experienced by (im)migrant communities.

Toward these goals, the LEME-PAR draws liberally from Paulo Freire's (1970) teachings, taking his concept of conscientization as a guiding principle in our work (Gildersleeve & LEME, 2009). Conscientization can be understood as the development of a critical consciousness that recognizes inequality in people's daily lives (Freire, 1973). As we reflect on our circumstances, we can effect change both individually and socially. Freire also instructs our understanding of knowledge as a dialectical coconstruction across all participants and unifying theory and practice (1973). We seek to produce counterhegemonic understandings of educational opportunities for Mexican (im)migrant communities. As such, the LEME-PAR is inherently a pedagogical project, working in the tradition of Freire to read the word in the world and the world in the word, to speak back to injustice, and to imagine a new world toward which to direct social action. As Ginwright argues, "equal in importance to the analytical skills developed through participatory action research, youth develop a collective radical imagination that is vital for community and social change" (2008, p. 15).

Working toward these counterhegemonic and radically imaginative ends, the LEME-PAR enacts a critical pedagogy framework for teaching and learning. Critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005; McLaren, 1986) seeks to expose social structures that prohibit human agency in inequitable ways. As a pedagogy, it draws from the knowledges distributed across any group of people, valuing the everyday ways of knowing the world as much as the academic (Moll, 1991). Further, the LEME-PAR's critical pedagogy requires all teachers and learners to recursively engage one another, alternating and assuming hybrid identities across the expert-novice spectrum (Rogoff, 2003). Within the LEME-PAR, we enact a critical pedagogy informed by Gramsci's notions that self and collective actualization can help address inequitable exercises of power—that is to say, everyday people can effect dramatic social change (Gramsci, 1988; Hall, 1981; Steinberg, 2001).

Organized around these theoretical and methodological principles, the LEME-PAR anchored itself by holding biannual retreats called "Migrant Student Summits." These were extended weekends when all 13 members of the LEME-PAR would gather and collectively engage in decisionmaking, research analysis, and critical reflection.¹ Dialogue is at the center of these migrant student summits. The primary purpose of our gathering is to share, respond, challenge, support,

¹ *These Migrant Student Summits have been funded in part by support from the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice as well as the College of Human Sciences at Iowa State University.*

repair, reframe, revise, and plan future action together. Agendas for these summits are built within a dialogic knowledge community framework. Dialogic knowledge communities use dialogue as a means of knowledge production and value the wealth of resources that multiple positions can exercise across and through dialogue (Kuntz, Pasque, Gildersleeve, & Carducci, 2010).

Core activities of the LEME-PAR included critical ethnographic methods, recursive reflexive practices, and community engagement toward generating critical consciousness. Specifically, students engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in their home communities by interviewing migrant parents about their experiences with schools, their perceptions of opportunities for their children, and their insights about the workings of immigration as a social process that shaped their families' lives. Students also conducted asset-mapping of their home communities, seeking to mark the resources that often go unnoticed or underrecognized by dominant discourse. These asset-mapping activities included noting where and when language development took place (both formal and informal), finding places in their home communities where cultural heritage was shared (e.g., quinceañeras), and identifying what educational opportunities were nearby (e.g., community colleges, universities).

I made quarterly visits with students in order to check in, share what other students were doing, and afford students an opportunity to process individually what they were learning through their research activities. These encounters were documented with ethnographic field notes, journals, and some recorded interviewing that was later transcribed. When making these visits, I also engaged in the local action that students were taking.

As part of our mutual commitment to each other and students' local communities, each student engaged in local activist efforts around issues pertinent to the LEME-PAR's concerns for equity and opportunity. Some students became leaders in local immigrant rights organizations. Others organized fundraisers for scholarships. Many participated in educational preparation programs that provided services to local schoolchildren. In these ways, our collective was more of a network, but everyone brought their action activity back to the group, sharing and reflecting on our collective actions during our Migrant Student Summits. We assumed that there was greater resource in our distributed expertise than any one of us could draw from alone

(Rogoff, 2003). The goal of sharing across our network was to assist each other in providing more informed and critically reflective leadership back home.

As a dialogic knowledge community situated within a participatory action research project, the LEME-PAR was a popular pedagogical encounter that engaged participants and society. These are typical process and outcome of PAR projects, as McIntyre (2008) notes:

It is by actively engaging in critical dialogue and collective reflection that the participants of PAR recognize that they have a stake in the overall project. Thus, PAR becomes a living dialectical process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act.

It is my argument that the “living dialectical process” of the LEME-PAR’s dialogic knowledge community as expressed through the collective’s research, reflection, and action practices generated a critical consciousness. Cumulatively these experiences validated LEME-PAR students’ higher education, assisting their success.

Critical Consciousness as Validation in the LEME-PAR

This article makes two arguments. Students in the LEME-PAR experienced validation through the cultivation of critical consciousness in a participatory action research project. And, these experiences of validation suggest a neo-critical validation theory rooted in Freirean concepts of critical pedagogy—reading the word in the world and the world in the word. First, I turn to a description of the critical consciousness cultivated through LEME-PAR activities.

Fieldwork with Parents

As mentioned, one of the major fieldwork projects that LEME-PAR has undertaken focused on the roles and relationships that parents served within migrant communities and the assets present in those communities in relation to social opportunity. Three themes emerged from the LEME-PAR’s analysis of these ethnographic endeavors: college-going, school involvement, and immigration (Gildersleeve, 2009a). Each of these themes was constituted by a critical rendering of parents’ participation in the social opportunity of their students’ lives, with particular attention paid to higher education. For example, LEME analyses uncovered that, as is typical of most parents, migrant parents wanted their children to succeed educationally and were willing to do

whatever they could to support their children. However, these migrant parents also recognized that their family's migration history challenged the normative college-going experience. As one set of parents' brief dialogue below illustrates:

Father: Even though it's better for us here, it's in some ways, harder for you....

Mother: Like it was hard for us in Mexico ... But here, their lives are hard in a different way. Hard for the dreaming.

As members of the LEME-PAR listened to these words during our Summer 2008 Migrant Student Summit, the sound of *las madres* echoed through the room as students engaged in dialogue to make sense of what one mother meant by life being "hard in a different way. Hard for the dreaming." Miguelito, a migrant student from the East San Francisco Bay, thought out-loud:

I think I kinda get it. Like, we always talk about wanting to honor their struggles, but like, I think *mi mama y mi papa* see how hard school can be for me here. And I think they want to be able to help even more. And I think like, maybe they worry that I don't think as big as other kids do. Or that they don't know how to help me reach my dreams like other kids parents maybe.

Yaneth, a migrant student from the Central Valley immediately chimed in:

I agree, yeah, but like, it is hard. And like, I don't want my parents thinking they can't be part of my dream, you know! When I hear this "hard for the dreaming," like, I want to cry. But I also want to recognize with my parents that we are all still struggling.

Nene, a migrant student from the Salinas Valley connected a few dots:

So, but like, even though things are better here, perhaps, but our parents and we know that things are still hard, we also learned about these resources, right? Like, I am so proud that my mom got her GED. And she couldn't do that without the local community college program.

Yaneth asked, "And so where are you going?"

Nene responded, "Like, our parents are our hope. And we're theirs. It's kinda cool." A collective quiet took over the room as the LEME-PAR sat and pondered Nene's insight.

The above exchange was made possible by the fact that students crafted the space to discuss their parents' perceptions of their social opportunities. Through the LEME-PAR project, these migrant students were able to share and dialogue about the discursive role their parents played in their navigation of schooling and the collegiate environment. They were also afforded the opportunity to muse about their role in their parents' experiences. Perhaps these conversations could have taken place in a residence hall or a classroom, but because they took place in a self-made space, generated by original research practices, and engaged friends and colleagues from different schools, regions, and universities, the LEME-PAR marked these particular conversations with a critical element, suggesting that students might foster validation on their own terms.

Sharing in Each Other's Activism

Another key activity of the LEME-PAR was our dispersed commitment to social action. As a collective of 13 individuals spread across different regions of the state, each committed to the struggle for educational equity, we did not often have the chance to engage in direct action with one another. However, sharing the process, practices, and products of our individual direct-action activities with one another became a salient component of our critical praxis. This is where our dialogic framework became a privileged force in our development of critical consciousness.

Our activism was diverse, yet interconnected. For example, Angel is a leader of an immigration reform movement in the East San Francisco Bay Area that focuses on undocumented student tuition policies in higher education. He coordinated and organized marches, teach-ins, and letter-writing campaigns. Yaneth became a leader for a service-learning organization at her university in southern California. She organized tutoring and after-school programs for Latino immigrant youth, and also coordinated a parents' workshop to assist Latino immigrant families with accessing social services available to them.

Sharing these experiences and the self-reflections we make from them became an important part of our collective praxis. Through sharing and informing one another, we were able to raise our collective consciousness about the complexity of immigrant equity issues. I chose to ask LEME students about these practices while visiting their home communities in between our migrant student summits.

Gael, from California's Central Valley, explained:

Something as simple as sharing what we're all doing—that's inspiring. Hearing about Yaneth's after-school program helped me think about my own involvement in our CAMP program. And I think hearing about me reminded other people about where we all came from.

I pressed Gael to explain further what he meant by "where we all came from." Gael responded:

It's like this—when I share about working with migrant students, with other migrant students, we all get to remember what it was like before we got to college. And when Yaneth shares about working with little kids, we all get to remember what it was like as a little kid—before we knew any of the hardship, really. And we get to talk about, not just how we're activists today, but how we became activists today, and why our education is so important to us.

On a visit to the Imperial Valley, another LEME student, Julio, put things another way:

I don't know ... it's like, I don't get to have these kinda conversations with a lot of people, you know? With anyone! And I think what each of us are doing is really cool. Really important. And getting to share that makes me ... I feel important.

Our friend and fellow LEME student, Lorena, also from the Imperial Valley, added to Julio's remarks that she "learns so much about how pervasive oppression is" when everyone shares about their activist work. Lorena explained:

I see the educational part, especially like with bilingual ed, because of my involvement in the center [a university research center focused on urban education], but I don't see the health or the environment part like Celia does cause she's all green about it and stuff. When I talk with Celia, you know, like, at the summits, then we get to connect the dots. And we get to feel really smart together.

As a collective, we found value in connecting our concerns about equity across our different activist endeavors. Rarely did two or more LEME participants engage in the exact same actions, but often, the lessons of those actions

permeated across the collective. The act of sharing—voicing and listening to activist identities and experiences—afforded students in the LEME-PAR the ability to cultivate understandings of their individual and collective cultural histories in relation to the inequities they were working to dismantle. As Julio shared, voicing and listening to each other's activist work provided a sense of importance. Simultaneously, these acts of agency—in the face of inequality—built a particular kind of self-efficacy that was tied to the interrogation of power in students' everyday lives. LEME-PAR students developed new identities as scholar-activists interconnected with broader social issues.

Mapping Migrant Lives

Freire (1973/2008) and other critical pedagogues have pointed to the significance of critical reflection in the development of critical consciousness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kincheloe, 2005; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). Rendón (2008) in her later work documented the importance of contemplative practices in higher education learning and success. For example, she described the practice of creating *cajitas*, or personal journey boxes, that explore individual subjectivity and relation to the broader social world, particularly education. Also, Futch (2007) has shown the pedagogical value of cognitive mapping for marginalized students, wherein students map their struggles between home and college, affording them opportunities to analyze and evaluate the inequities they face while developing strategies to address them. Within these traditions, the LEME-PAR engaged in shared activities of mapping migrant lives.

Building on the fieldwork with parents, asset mapping of students' home communities, and dialogues about migrant activism, the LEME-PAR collectively designed its own mapping activity, setting out to map migrant lives in the struggle for educational equity. These were visual representations of individual and collective journeys between and across home communities, higher education, and their myriad subjectivities. Students took time during one of our semiannual migrant student summits to draw, paint, and use other materials to visually represent their journeys as college students from migrant farm-working families. Some students organized their maps chronologically, often beginning with their own or their parents' departure from Mexico. Other students organized their maps politically—drawing relationships between

the different people, groups, offices, and institutions that informed their development into the college students they had become.

Regardless of the maps' organization, these reflectively generated artifacts afforded students the opportunity to recognize the moments in their lives where and when they managed to break with the dominant expectations of their educational trajectories. These were moments in students' lives that I have elsewhere called transformative learning moments in students' college-going—moments when and where students could take strategic action toward the futures they wished to pursue as active agents of their own historical making (Gildersleeve, 2010). By marking the chronology of critical incidents in students' lives and/or the relationships of individuals and institutions that either constrained or enabled their academic successes, LEME-PAR students could recognize how their daily lives were making changes in higher education. Their corporeal presence in academe and their journeys to get there could be understood as evidence of themselves as historical cultural workers; they could recognize themselves as agents in society, rather than passive objects of dominant power structures.

As a case example, Yaneth's map depicted her life via the different community settings she vacillated in and around. She carved space in her map for her family's house in the Central Valley, where she noted that she and her family knew almost everyone else in their small town. In another space, labeled simply "college," she drew figures of herself and her two older siblings. She put "college" in a bubble-cloud, which she connected to her family's home. When presenting her map, Yaneth stated, "because our family's dreams are for all of us to go to college, and so far, with me, we're three for three." As a subarea to "college," Yaneth drew a large lecture hall with only one person in it, but outside there were rows and rows of people. This caused a bit of confusion with the rest of the LEME-PAR. In explanation, Yaneth said:

It's me at school. I never feel more Chicana than when I'm in class sometimes, because I'll be the only *mujer* in the whole room. But I remember *mi compas*, like my sorors [sorority sisters] and like all of us [LEME]. Altogether, we're always right there outside the lecture hall for each other.

Lorena spoke up near that moment and said, "Seeing this on your map, it made me think about all the migrant students who don't get to go to college. That's what I thought the people outside were."

“Well, I think it’s both, no?” Yaneth replied.

Nene chimed in, “That’s what I was thinking. It’s really cool that your map works both ways, and with your family too.”

Miguel asked, “How with the family?”

Nene responded, “With the way that college is their dream, but it’s also the reality so far for Yaneth and her sister and her brother. Like the world as it could be turned into the world as it is, but it’s not over yet.”

“Yeah.”

“I like that.”

“Ooh, Nene, that’s kinda sexy.”

The LEME-PAR agreed and felt stronger together for a moment.

Yaneth’s mapping of her life as a migrant student afforded the LEME-PAR an opportunity to analyze their social conditions, identify some of the inequality they struggle through, and begin to discursively render a plausible alternate reality. These activities continued and seemed to affirm students’ possible selves as successful college students. Further, the social analysis of the mapping activity reinforced the dialogic nature of their self-generating collective self-efficacy. The LEME-PAR was strengthening its collective critical consciousness.

Toward a Neo-Critical Validation Theory

Through activities associated with the LEME-PAR project, migrant students constructed their own processes of developing critical consciousness, with each activity building on and drawing from another. As such, these processes enabled students to foster self-efficacy as a collective of Mexican migrant college students, irrespective of which college or university they were attending. In these ways, the critical consciousness generated from participating in the LEME-PAR was an enabling process that created self-efficacy and was oriented

primarily as developmental process, rather than focused on material outcomes. These are cornerstones of Rendón's validation theory (1994).

However, students in the LEME-PAR experienced validation in ways that differed from Rendón's initial development of the theory. As explained earlier, validation was conceived as an externally generated experience; Rendón demonstrated the benefits when institutional actors (e.g., faculty) validated students either academically or interpersonally. LEME-PAR students' validation was unique in four ways:

1. It was self-validating within the group;
2. Students exercised their own agency to create self-efficacy, in a recursive process;
3. This recursive process relied on critical social analysis of everyday experiences through dialogic interaction; and,
4. Validation was created exogenously from institutionalized practices.

Rendón's theory of validation was founded on pedagogical values of wholeness and honoring experiences of the self (Rendón, 2009). A neo-critical validation theory recognizes a political dimension in students' wholeness. Power, agency, and identities circulated throughout the development of critical consciousness in the LEME-PAR. Students sought to investigate, share, and map the exercises of power in their daily lives that produced inequalities and the tools to address them. Their work was political, because it sought to reimagine the body politic of opportunity. This political dimension can support students recursively through their own process of development in relation to broader social concerns that connect students with their home and cultural communities.

Rendón's theory of validation was founded on pedagogical values of wholeness and honoring experiences of the self. A neo-critical validation theory recognizes a political dimension in students' wholeness.

Conclusions

Validation theory changed the landscape of how scholars and practitioners understood students' participation in higher education, particularly in relation to student departure and persistence. Incorporating the political within

the educational has increasingly been shown to support student success (Gildersleeve, 2010; Gutiérrez, Arzubaiaga, & Hunter, 2009). Further, critical engagement with higher education as an institution has proven an effective way for nondominant students to navigate and negotiate postsecondary contexts (Morrell, 2008; Rogers, 2008). As such, a new, critical infusion into validation theory can help transform it for the twenty-first century. By incorporating a critical element wherein students' experiences can be placed in a sociopolitical context, their participation in higher education can be validated via the development of a critical consciousness about their own educations in relationship to broader society and their home communities.

This neo-critical validation affords students the opportunity to generate their own versions of validation, divorcing, at least in part, students' success from the power-laden assumption that institutional actors must bestow validation upon students. In this sense, students regain autonomy and agency over their experience and mitigate dependency on the institutions that have marginalized them historically. It is important to note that validation was never conceived as wielding power over students, but rather as a behavioral modification in educators' practice—authentically caring and fashioning compassion to help students succeed (Rendón, 2009). I contend that a neo-critical theory of validation could be grounded in students' material realities and spring forth from their own participation in the interrogation of those material constraints.

Neo-critical validation, then, could lead to new revolutions within academia. Students producing self-efficacy through their own agency could construct an academic context where their histories and futures are coconstructed on more equitable grounds. However, this should not be heard as a siren call to dismiss all institutional actors from caring about and fostering validation in nondominant students. Rather, it provides yet another opportunity for educators to engage in validating work with students. Administrators and faculty members can foster a campus climate that supports neo-critical validation by engaging in public pedagogies that create opportunities for critical consciousness to be strengthened collectively.

Specifically, administrators can provide models of dialogic knowledge communities for student organizations. Enrollment professionals specifically can provide resources such as time, money, and advising for community-based relationships to be fostered between nondominant students and the broader

communities served by the institution. Faculty can pursue critical pedagogies in their classrooms that foster and support dialogic community building. Rather than assuming authoritative stances on students' engagement, faculty can assist students in claiming their own stances in relation to each other. Policies, practices, and funding that support grassroots organizing, like the kind that initiated the inter-institutional LEME-PAR, can be adopted by administrators and supported by faculty. Rather than taking over the work of validation, faculty and administrators can privilege their roles as facilitators of neo-critical validation by engaging students in the raising of critical consciousness around issues of equity and agency.

The LEME-PAR represents one such offering of opportunity. It serves as an exogenous extension of academic activity, but one that is driven by students for students yet interconnected with community and social concerns. Through the sociocultural analyses and sociopolitical foundations of the LEME-PAR, Mexican migrant students engaged in critical self-reflection, critical investigation, and critical pedagogy, which lead to critical consciousness. The work of the LEME-PAR can be understood as the validation described by Rendón, but generated through a praxis-driven interrogation of power in higher education opportunity. Hence, a neo-critical validation was born.

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Faculty Validation and Persistence Among Nontraditional Community College Students

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Abstract

Community colleges enroll large numbers of nontraditional students who are at greater risk for nonpersistence in college. This research examines the influence of validation by faculty on students' sense of integration in college and intent to persist. Validation is defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44), in this case faculty. Three student characteristics were taken into account: gender, race/ethnicity, and age. For each subgroup, an assessment was made of the extent to which higher rates of faculty validation predicted a greater sense of integration in college or intent to persist. Higher rates of faculty validation moderately to strongly predicted students' sense of integration across all subgroups. With regard to the extent to which faculty validation predicted students' intent to persist at the college, significant, positive results were found for females, Hispanic students, and both younger and older students.

Problem Statement

Factors influencing student persistence in college have been widely studied in response to increasing concern about high noncompletion rates among students who enter higher education (Braxton, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While more students are entering college than ever before, large numbers leave during the first year, and a substantial proportion depart before attaining a degree or other credential (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004).

Some types of institutions are considerably more likely than others to have high rates of student attrition. Two-year colleges comprise 44% of all postsecondary institutions in the U.S. and enroll 46% of American undergraduates, including over half of all postsecondary freshmen and sophomores (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002). Less than one third of those who enroll in two-year colleges receive any kind of certificate or degree within three years of entering (Berkner, He, Cataldi, & Knepper, 2002; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001). When considering bachelor's degree attainment, students who start out

at a two-year institution with plans to complete a bachelor's degree are 15–20% less likely to do so than students starting their postsecondary education at a four-year institution (Fiske, 2004). The current research was conducted in a community college.

Low persistence rates are of concern to students who are not able to meet their educational and career goals as well as to institutions monitoring their students' and their own performance. Persistence is also of concern to society at large because college-educated citizens contribute in many ways to the social good and are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors (Barton, 2002; Carey, 2004; Fiske, 2004). Other advantages accrue to those who attend college. In their comprehensive summaries of the existing literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) observe that the personal advantages consistently associated with college attendance include: significant cognitive gains, especially in verbal ability; gains in knowledge and critical thinking; greater ability to deal with complexity; increases in tolerance, aesthetic sensibility, and moral development; increases in the amount of time devoted to children and greater encouragement of their college attendance; better health; and an improved sense of psychological well-being.

While persistence rates are low among U.S. college students in general, early departure is much more common among some groups than others. There is extensive research that identifies the specific groups of students who are less likely to persist in college (e.g., Berkner, He, Cataldi, & Knepper, 2002; Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004; Rendón, 1994; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1997, 2004; Woodard, Mallory, & De Luca, 2001). The Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (NCES, 2002) found that about half of African Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans who entered a four-year college in 1996 were still at the same institution three years later, as opposed to 64% of Whites and 71% of Asian Americans. Women constitute increasingly larger percentages of those finishing college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; NCES, 2002). Sixty-six percent of women who entered college in 1995 graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years, as opposed to 59% of men (Carey, 2004). In addition, students whose parents attended college are more likely to attain a college degree (Bean & Metzner, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Delayed enrollment in college puts a student at risk for not completing a degree (Feldman, 1993; Price, 2004; Summers, 2003), meaning that students who are older upon

entry are at greater risk. Finally, students who have done less well in high school are at higher risk for not persisting in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In order to improve student persistence in community colleges, there is a need for a better understanding of the factors that influence it. The purpose of this study is to illuminate one possible influence on student persistence, as well as on students' sense of integration in college, often posited to be a necessary precondition for persistence (e.g., Tinto, 1993)—that of faculty validation (Rendón, 1994). The current research focuses particularly on the extent to which validation by faculty may differentially influence different groups of students.

Reasons Why Students Leave

While some students leave college because they are not keeping pace academically, Fiske (2004) quotes Gardiner who states that, “only a quarter of [students] who do not return for the sophomore year will have left in poor academic standing” (p. 11). Significant numbers depart prematurely because of college costs, competing priorities, and lack of appropriate avenues for involvement in the college community (Kuh, 2001; Matti, 2000; Tinto, 2004). Other explanations emerge from the fields of sociology, psychology, economics, and organizational management (Braxton, 2002). While these studies vary greatly in approach and philosophy, they often emphasize the importance of student characteristics, behaviors, and decisions in the departure from higher education.

However, other researchers emphasize the role that institutions themselves play in influencing student graduation rates. Carey (2004) notes that,

institutional-level data show that some institutional graduation rates are much, much different from others, *even when compared to institutions with very similar students*. In fact, even after controlling for a host of possible factors that might influence graduation rates—including students' SAT and ACT scores, institutional mission, financial resources, degree programs, size, location and others—we still find that some colleges and universities far outperform their peers. (p. 7, emphasis original)

This study assumes that institutions are in a position to affect student integration and student persistence in college; one way that this happens is through the validation of students by faculty members.

Theoretical Framework

When attempting to explain student departure from college, many scholars emphasize the importance of student integration or involvement in college in influencing student persistence and success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1993, 1998, 2004). Among them, the work of Tinto has attained greatest prominence, with numerous studies conducted to assess the accuracy of the 13 propositions that comprise his Longitudinal Model of Student Departure (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). It is difficult to summarize Tinto's model succinctly, as it is complex and has been refined a great deal over time. Tinto (1993) explains it as follows:

Broadly understood, [the model] argues that individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experience in those systems, as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration, continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments.... [The] model posits that, other things being equal, the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure. (p. 115–116)

In Braxton's (2002) edited volume, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*, a number of researchers discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Tinto's model and consider directions for future research on the topic of student persistence. Braxton refers to a review of literature conducted by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) that summarized the empirical support for each of thirteen propositions implicit in Tinto's model. They concluded that four of these propositions received strong empirical backing in multi-institutional tests, while five were strongly supported in single institutional tests. In some cases, the lack of support for specific propositions may have been attributable to the original construct under consideration, while in others, problems with measurement of the constructs may have played a role.

Rendón (1994) and others (e.g., Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1996) argued against an overemphasis on integration. Their research

indicated that, for nontraditional students, validation may be a more important influence on student success than integration or involvement. They pointed out that integration is typically viewed as occurring naturally as students become involved in campus life through participation in college activities, living in residence halls, and taking classes. In Rendón's view, students who had not grown up assuming they would go to college were unlikely to become readily integrated into college environments without additional assistance. Validation, defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44), could provide this extra boost.

Rendón (1994) first began exploring the idea of validation when participating as a researcher in a large qualitative study of ways that college student learning was affected by student involvement under the auspices of the Transition to College Project (described in Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996). A total of 132 first-year students in four diverse college settings participated in focus groups to discuss their decisions to attend college, their expectations for it, and their perceptions of the effect college was having on them. Students were selected as representative of diverse genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and residences (on campus or commuting).

The study found important differences between traditional and nontraditional students (Rendón & Jalomo, 1995). While traditional students generally felt confident about being able to succeed in college, many of the nontraditional students did not. Involvement in college did not come easily to them, and depended on "active intervention from significant others to help them negotiate institutional life" (p. 37). Students identified as likely to need extra validation included: racial and ethnic minorities, students who had been out of school for some time, those who had been "off the track of life" (p. 10), full-time mothers or single parents, immature students, those who did poorly in high school, those scared of a new culture, and those who felt incapable of learning.

Rendón (1994) was convinced that, under the right conditions, "even the most vulnerable nontraditional students [could] be transformed into powerful learners through in- and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation" (p. 37). The role of faculty was highlighted as particularly important, while peers and family members were also central. The key was: 1) having someone take an active interest in the student as an individual and 2) structuring activities that

would elicit (or require) their full participation in learning. Further, validating experiences were most likely to have an impact when provided by people with a deep understanding of the students' cultural and social background. Simply providing opportunities for student learning and integration—and expecting students to take advantage of them—was not enough. Her research indicated that students were much more likely to become integrated and to persist when they experienced active efforts to validate them on the part of representatives of the educational institution. She described ways that nontraditional students could be transformed into “powerful learners” (p. 39) when faculty and other members of the campus community reached out to them with genuine concern and reinforced the idea that they could be successful as students.

Although Rendón (1994) considered validation to be an alternative to integration or involvement, validation can also be viewed as a precondition for integration. Tinto's (1993) definition of integration as a sense of “competent membership” (p. 208) as a result of, among other things, student interaction with faculty and staff is highly compatible with Rendón's description of the benefits derived from validation. Thus, the current research hypothesizes that validation may lead to greater integration and/or to increased student persistence.

In 2006, this researcher (Barnett, 2006) conducted a study to test five hypotheses and three subhypotheses related to the influence of faculty validation on integration and persistence. These were formulated as assessing, and elaborating upon, two propositions in Tinto's (1993) model, i.e., that higher rates of faculty/student interaction in the form of faculty validation predicted greater student integration and that greater student integration predicted students' intent to persist. Evidence was found to support both of these propositions.

The current research was designed to investigate the extent to which faculty validation predicts: 1) student integration and 2) intent to persist, for specific subgroups of students. Rendón (1994) hypothesized that nontraditional students would be especially likely to benefit from validation. In this study, three student characteristics sometimes associated with nontraditional status (see Kim, 2002) are taken into account: gender (male, female), race/ethnicity (Black, White, Hispanic, Asian¹) and age (under 25, 25+). For each subgroup,

¹ Short versions are used in this document. In the research, the following racial/ethnic categories were used: Black/African American, White/Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Other (specific identification was requested).

an assessment was made of the extent to which higher rates of faculty validation predicted a greater sense of integration (defined as a sense of competent membership) or intent to persist (defined as the intent to return to study at the same institution during the following semester).

Hypotheses

The work of previous authors on the topic of student validation in the community college has been largely exploratory and qualitative (e.g., Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Jalomo, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1996). This study was designed to use quantitative methods to further investigate the relationships between validating experiences, on the one hand, and a sense of integration and persistence in college, on the other, with a focus on student subgroups. The study was designed to test six hypotheses:

1. For both men and women, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college.
2. For both men and women, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college.
3. For Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college.
4. For Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college.
5. For both younger and older students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college.
6. For both younger and older students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college.

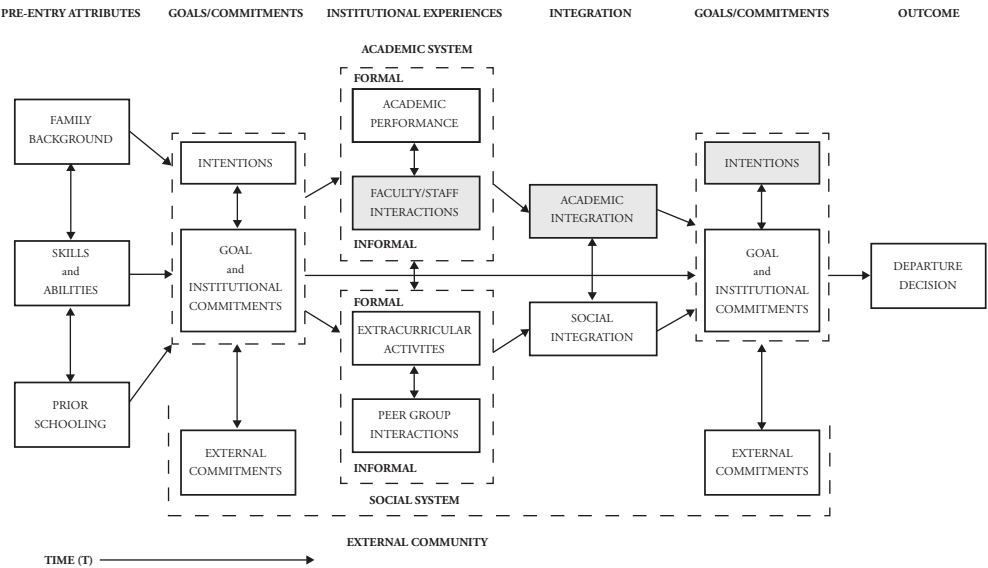
Conceptual Framework

The current study was designed to examine and elaborate upon a specific aspect of Tinto's model, as shown in Figure 1. The shaded areas in the figure show the portion of the model explored in this research—the portion positing that the interactions students have with faculty/staff influence their sense of integration, and that integration, in turn, influences student intentions to persist.

Specifically, the research is intended to serve as an elaboration of Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of college student departure, using Rendón's (1994) work

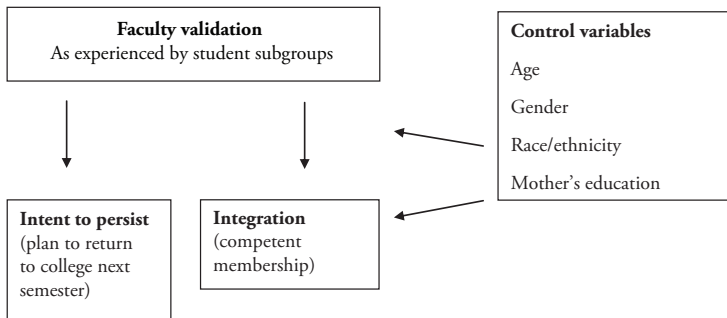
on validation as the basis for understanding the ways that faculty and staff in classrooms and college environments influence students’ sense of integration and their intent to persist.

FIGURE 1 | Tinto’s Model with Relationships of Interest in the Current Research Indicated



From: “Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition,” by V. Tinto, 1993, p.114.

Rendón (1994) proposes that validating experiences are of particular importance to nontraditional students. This research explores whether this is indeed the case. While it is certainly of interest to learn whether the model works for community college students in general, it is also important to learn whether there are groups of students for whom validation is an especially important influence on their sense of integration and their intent to persist in college. Thus, this study will look at how well the model works for specific subgroups distinguished by age (25 and older, less than 25), gender (male, female) and race/ethnicity (African American, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, White, Other). Figure 2 shows the model that underlies the current research based on the segment of interest in Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist model.

FIGURE 2 | A Model of the Relationships of Interest in the Current Research

Methodology and Data Sources

A demographically diverse, urban community college was selected for participation in this study. An urban community college was selected for three reasons. First, very little previous research has been conducted in them and they are not well understood as institutions (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Second, they generally have more diverse populations than their suburban or rural counterparts (Smith & Vellani, 1999), an important consideration for a study on validation in relation to nontraditional students. Finally, student graduation rates tend to be lower than those of colleges in suburban and rural areas (Cullen, 2005), making the study of persistence in these settings even more critical.

The students at Midwest College are diverse, coming from 144 countries and speaking more than 56 languages. The college's data indicate that, in the 2004–05 academic year, 7,355 students were enrolled in credit courses, 17,817 in adult basic education, and 2,833 in other programs for a total of 26,652 students. The average age of students in credit programs was 29, and in all programs combined it was 32. Of students in credit programs, 53% indicated that their goal was to transfer to a four-year college after graduation (Midwest College Statistical Digest, 2005).

The population of interest consisted of all students attending credit-bearing classes at this institution. The study sample included students enrolled in all introductory college-level English classes (English 101, English 102) offered during the Spring of 2006. These were selected as those in which all students entering college with intent to complete a degree would participate. Students in these classes would therefore be likely to be representative of degree-seeking students at the college in general. In addition, students in these classes would have already demonstrated their readiness to undertake college-level work, by passing placement tests or completing remedial coursework. Thus, they would be somewhat less likely to consider dropping out due to inadequate academic skill levels of the type associated with lack of persistence in college (Adelman, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

A cross-sectional survey design was selected for this research. To accomplish this, the following variables were operationalized and measured: 1) validation by faculty, 2) persistence in college, and 3) integration, defined here as *competent membership*. Previously validated scales were found to measure students' sense of competence and membership (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Intent to persist was defined as students' expressions of their intent to continue their studies at the same institution during the semester following their participation in this research, if they had not yet attained the degree or certification toward which they were working. To operationalize this variable, students were asked to respond to one item: "I am planning on returning to this college for the Fall 2006 semester." In addition, students were asked whether they expected to complete a credential by the end of the spring 2006 semester and removed from the analysis if they did.

No previous survey research had been conducted on faculty validation. Therefore it was necessary to undertake a process to develop a faculty validation scale in order to conduct this research. This was done following the recommendations of numerous scholars (e.g., Dawis, 1987; Devellis, 2003; Ebel & Frisbie, 1991; Framboise & Coleman, 1991; Kuh, 2001) and involved the use of multiple measures to validate the scale, specifically: (a) the creation of items based on the literature, (b) a review of the items by ten national

experts on student development and student persistence in postsecondary education, (c) the selection of items, and (d) the use of a number of statistical and procedural measures to assess their performance. The full instrument was pilot tested and the results analyzed to assess content and construct validity and reliability. (For a full description of the procedures used in the development of this scale, see Barnett, 2006.)

The final faculty validation scale consisted of 27 items, with students asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each. It included items that pertained to *students feeling known and valued* (e.g., I feel accepted as a capable student by my instructors; I am encouraged by my instructors to openly share my views in class), *caring instruction* (e.g., My instructors are willing to take as long as needed to help me understand the class material; My instructors provide lots of written feedback on the assignments I turn in), *appreciation for diversity* (e.g., People of color are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion; Women are encouraged to contribute to the class discussion), and *mentoring* (e.g., I've had one or more instructors at this college whom I thought of as a mentor. At least one instructor has talked with me about my personal goals at this college).

Surveys were administered to a total of 333 students, from 22 English classes at the selected college, during the spring of 2006. Scores for each student were calculated indicating the extent to which each: 1) felt validated by faculty at the college, 2) felt a sense of integration at the college, and 3) intended to return to the college in the subsequent semester.

Compilation of the student demographic information revealed that students who participated in the study ranged in age from 17 to 71, with a mean age of 25. Sixty one percent were female. Non-White students comprised 76% of the total. A large proportion, 38%, had attended high school in other countries. Clearly, a diverse sample was obtained, as displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of Sampled Students

Characteristic	Number of respondents	Response categories	<i>P</i>
Age	317	Under 18 years	2%
		18–22 years	46%
		23–25 years	19%
		26–30 years	18%
		Over 30 years	18%
Gender	327	Male	39%
		Female	61%
Race/ethnicity	320	Black/African American	30%
		White/Caucasian	24%
		Hispanic/Latino	20%
		Asian/PI	20%
		Other	6%
Location of high school attended	285	Chicago	45%
		Other U.S.	18%
		Other countries	38%
Mother's education	309	No high school	13%
		Attended high school	10%
		Completed high school	18%
		Some college	13%
		Earned associate degree	9%
		Earned bachelor's degree	18%
		Earned graduate degree	13%
Father's education	303	Don't know	6%
		No high school	12%
		Attended high school	9%
		Completed high school	13%
		Some college	15%
		Earned associate degree	8%
		Earned bachelor's degree	16%
		Earned graduate degree	17%
		Don't know	12%

Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to test the six hypotheses. The procedures included the use of control variables for gender, race/ethnicity, mothers' education, age, number of credits in which students were enrolled, and college grade point average. These were entered into the equation as Block 1. The independent variable, faculty validation, was entered as Block 2. The dependent variables were students' sense of integration or intent to persist

in college. The pertinent items were removed as control variables from the equations when results for specific subgroups were sought. Missing values were removed in a listwise fashion. Collinearity statistics were obtained for all of the analyses, and data was reviewed to determine whether an excess of outliers posed a problem (over 10%, according to Muijs, 2004). They did not.

Findings

In order to put the findings of this research in perspective, a multiple linear regression analysis was first performed to assess the extent to which higher rates of faculty validation predicted a greater sense of integration among all students surveyed. Muijs (2004) considered an R square of greater than .500 to indicate that a model is a strong fit to the data. An overall R square for this model of .559 was obtained, significant at the $p < .01$ level, indicating that a strong fit was obtained. In other words, higher rates of faculty validation were found to strongly predict higher levels of integration or students' sense of competent membership within the context of the overall model.

It was also helpful to ascertain whether students who had validating experiences were more likely to express the intent to remain in college. Muijs (2004) considered an R square between .11 and .30 to indicate a model with a modest fit to the data. Using this guideline, an overall R square for the model of .246, significant at the $p < .01$ level, indicated that a modest fit was obtained. In other words, higher rates of faculty validation were found to modestly predict a greater likelihood that students would express their intent to return to college for the subsequent semester within the context of the overall model.

Subsequently, the same models were run for each of the student subgroups in order to test the six hypotheses of interest in this research. It should be noted that the small size of the subgroups in many cases may have limited the extent to which significant effects could be detected and/or complicated interpretation of results. The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 | Results of Multiple Linear Regression Equations

Student characteristic	Subgroup	n	Faculty validation (FV) predicts integration		Faculty validation (FV) predicts intent to persist	
			(R square)*	Beta of FV	(R square)*	Beta of FV
Gender	Male	57	.537	.696		
	Female	77	.641	.753	.370	
Race/ethnicity	White	41	.721	.858		
	Black	41	.438	.486		
	Hispanic	24	.636	.788	.490	.514
	Asian	25	.497	.619		
Age	Under 25	83	.520	.673	.325	.278
	25+	51	.641	.740	.195	.387

*Only statistically significant ($p < .05$) R square values are shown.

These findings supported hypothesis one, which states that, for both men and women, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college. The model for men yielded an R square of .537, indicating that a strong fit had been obtained (per Muijs, 2004; his criteria are used throughout). The model for women yielded an R square of .641, indicating that a strong fit had been obtained. In other words, for both men and women, faculty validation was found to strongly predict higher levels of integration or their sense of competent membership in the college, within the context of the overall model.

With regard to hypothesis two, which states that, for both men and women, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college, the model yielded significant results for women, but not for men. The model for women yielded an R square of .370, indicating that a moderate fit had been obtained. In other words, for women, but not for men, faculty validation was found to moderately predict a stronger intent to persist in college, within the context of the overall model.

These findings supported hypothesis three, which states that, for Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college, with especially strong models emerging for White

and Hispanic students. Specifically, the models for White and Hispanic students yielded R squares of .721 and .636 respectively, indicating that strong fits had been obtained. For Black and Asian students, the models yielded R squares of .438 and .497 respectively, indicating that a moderate fit had been obtained. In other words, for all of the racial/ethnic groups considered in this research, faculty validation predicted higher levels of integration or a sense of competent membership in the college, within the context of the overall model.

With regard to hypothesis four, which states that, for Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college, the model yielded significant results for Hispanic students, but not for the other groups. The model for Hispanics yielded an R square of .491, indicating that a moderate fit had been obtained. In other words, for Hispanic students, but not for any of the other racial/ethnic groups, faculty validation was found to moderately predict a stronger intent to persist in college, within the context of the overall model.

These findings also supported hypothesis five, which stated that, for both younger and older students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater sense of integration in college. The model for students younger than 25 yielded an R square of .520, indicating that a strong fit had been obtained. The model for students 25 and older yielded an R square of .641, indicating that a strong fit had been obtained. In other words, for both younger and older students, faculty validation was found to strongly predict higher levels of integration or their sense of competent membership in the college, within the context of the overall model.

Finally, with regard to hypothesis six, which stated that, for both younger and older students, higher rates of validation by faculty predict a greater intent to persist in college, the model yielded significant results for both younger and older students. The model for students under 25 yielded an R square of .325, indicating that a moderate fit had been obtained. The model for students 25 and older yielded an R square of .195, indicating that a modest fit had been obtained. In other words, for both younger and older students, faculty validation was found to moderately or modestly predict a stronger intent to persist in college, within the context of the overall model.

These findings provide empirical support for Rendón and Jalomo's (1995) proposition that validation can contribute to students' sense of integration and intent to persist in college, among other positive outcomes. In their research, validation by college faculty and staff was found to help nontraditional students to become integrated, leading to the positive outcomes associated with integration. Similarly, in this research, students who had experienced greater faculty validation, as indicated by their responses to relevant survey items, were more likely to feel integrated and also to express the intent to persist.

Implications

Institutions are experiencing increasing pressures to improve rates of graduation from federal, state, and local governments and from the public. Over 47 states employ accountability measures calling for performance reporting in higher education, while 36 have instituted either performance funding or performance budgeting (Dougherty, 2010). In addition, many community colleges are deeply committed to helping students achieve their educational goals. For example, Ayers (2002) found that 82% of Southern U.S. community colleges included access as part of their formal mission statement. To fulfill this mission, many community colleges invest considerable energy into understanding and addressing those factors that have been shown to influence student persistence decisions.

The current research findings suggest that institutions should consider taking measures to increase faculty validation of students. This study further suggests that while all students benefit from validation by faculty, Hispanic students and women may be most likely to respond to faculty validation by continuing their studies at the institution; perhaps

they could be targeted for extra attention by faculty. While not every faculty member can or will actively validate students, it would appear that most would be willing. In a survey of faculty (Evelyn, 2005), 83% of respondents said

While all students benefit from validation by faculty, Hispanic students and women may be most likely to respond to faculty validation by continuing their studies at the institution.

that faculty members at their institution were interested in students' academic problems, and 85% were interested in their personal problems. In addition, 72% experience joy in their work "to a great extent" (p. 4) which could translate into a willingness to devote time and energy.

Three strategies that could be used to increase the likelihood that faculty will engage in validating practices include: (a) college-provided incentives to faculty to invest time in assisting nontraditional and underserved students, (b) helping faculty to learn about the importance of meaningful validation of students, and (c) redefining faculty roles and responsibilities to explicitly include validation of students in ways that research suggests may be especially powerful (see Barnett, 2006). It is recommended that approaches such as these be piloted and then tested using rigorous research methods.

In addition, further study is needed to address an important limitation of this study. Research is needed to learn whether faculty validation predicts actual retention in college, in particular through the completion of a degree or certificate. Likewise, further study would reveal important details regarding the types of faculty validation that are most predictive of increased student retention, and which students are most likely to respond to these practices.

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Narrative Inquiry

Identity, Knowledge Production, and Validation Theory: A Narrative Inquiry

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The stories we tell reveal who we are.

-Leon Edel, 1987

There was not one person who said Laura, you know, you can make it ... but there were instances in which for example when I was in middle-school, I was in accelerated courses, in high school I was in some accelerated courses so I knew I had smarts you know, I knew that when I applied myself I was intelligent and I knew I could succeed.

-Laura Rendón, interview excerpt

As researchers, who we are and the ways we experience life shape the knowledge we produce. How we are situated in relation to history, gender, religion, class, ethnic background, and other markers of identity and social location, are all factors that inform our research (Scheurich, 1994). Knowledge is always marked by its origins (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991), making it essential that we situate knowledge as we engage with it.

In this narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Denzin, 1989; Reissman, 1993, 2007), I explore the biography of validation theorist Laura Rendón. Based on semistructured interviews conducted between October 2001 and June 2002, while Rendón served as Veffie Milstead Jones Endowed Chair at California State University–Long Beach, I focus on her life history in an effort to understand how her identity and life experiences have shaped her as a researcher and validation theorist, with an emphasis on the interplay between her life story and her work on validation theory.

As theorized by Rendón, validation theory is heavily informed by the work of Mary Belenky and her coauthors, documented in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Based on a large study of women college students, Belenky and her colleagues argue that conceptions of knowledge and truth are shaped by a male-dominated culture that fails to recognize and value women's ways of knowing. To address this reality, authors suggest, educators must focus on connection, understanding, acceptance, collaboration, and a recognition of multiple ways of knowing "to help women develop their own voices" (p. 229). Similarly, Rendón, in situating validation theory, argues that conceptions of how students succeed through self-directed involvement in college are based on the experiences of traditional White students of privilege, and therefore fail to take into account the experiences of first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color, who often experience the academic environment as invalidating. To help nontraditional students succeed, Rendón (1994), based on a study of 132 first-year students, called for institutional efforts to foster "active academic and interpersonal validation" (p. 45), which she described as a "process that affirms, supports, enables, and reinforces ... [students'] capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals" (p. 45). The challenge, she suggests, concerns "how to harness the strength [of diversity], and how to unleash the creativity and exuberance for learning that is present in all students who feel free to learn, free to be who they are, and validated for what they know and believe" (p. 51).

Through several close readings of the transcripts from my interviews with Rendón, I marked the six elements she identifies in validation theory (academic validation, interpersonal validation, early experiences of validation, self-confidence through validation, student development through validation, and validation as a developmental process rather than an end in and of itself) in her own experience as a first-generation college student, who is now a successful senior higher education scholar. I was curious about the role of the elements she describes in validation theory in her own educational journey. How had her life experiences shaped her focus and development of validation theory? I was also curious about her ideas concerning social change and her own practice and growth as a scholar concerned with cultural change to better meet the needs of a diverse student body (Rendón, 1994).

The Early Years

Rendón, the daughter of Clementina Linares and Leopoldo Rendón, was born in 1948 in Laredo, Texas, where she grew up in a family of music lovers, with two sisters, Elva, 10 years her senior, and Ileana, born a year and a half after Laura.

As I asked about her childhood, she described growing up in Laredo:

At the time Laredo was a sleepy ... town located on the border, literally on the border dividing the U.S. and Mexico, [with] the Rio Grande in the middle. There was no four-year college there, there was just a two-year college, and that two-year college was just a struggling little place that got people going, but was nowhere near the community colleges we see today. My parents were separated when I was four or five, and the traditions that were communicated to me as a child were really that, you know okay, so maybe you are doing everything in school, but you know you are going to have to work, everybody works. I knew no one that had been to college. I had no one encouraging me to go to college. There were times when we lived on \$15 a week, which was for four people. I can remember times when we did not have enough to eat, we did not have money to buy shoes and we had holes in our shoes so, when I talk about low SES [socioeconomic status], I am talking low SES.

Our conversation quickly moved to a focus on education. Reflecting on her first exposure to education, Rendón described being five or six years old when her mother created a job in education for herself.

She advertised a little school, “*una escuelita*,” and kids from all over the community would come and for 50 cents a week she would teach them how to add and subtract. She went out and bought her own chalk and her blackboard was made out of tin that covered the store that was abandoned and that is where she had her classes.

Rendón’s early experiences suggest that she became aware of the importance of education early in life and that she also experienced being validated as a competent learner in her primary years. She described what it was like to start first grade:

I remember when I was in the first grade and how the teacher divided up the class. I think there were three or four groups, three groups for sure; group one were the smart kids that knew how to read, group two were those

who were okay but not quite there and group three were “too bad.” Group one had four kids, group two had about twenty, and then group three had about six or eight. There were three boys and one girl in group one and I was the girl in that group.... What probably helped my reading was that my mother really liked to read. I mean, she did not read academic books, but novellas and comic books, so reading for me was ... sort of a refuge. I would read encyclopedias, and I would read comic books, and novellas, and magazines. Reading was always a part of my life. I love to read.

Throughout her K–12 experience, Rendón was placed in accelerated classes. However, in fifth grade, she described herself as becoming a mediocre student without really knowing why. This changed, however, when she transferred to a new middle school in seventh grade.

I found myself in a class of the group threes and ... fours. There were about three or four of us that were totally misplaced and we got taken out of there because we were certainly above and beyond the other kids and from then on I was in accelerated classes.

While she experienced academic validation, she also points to a lack of interpersonal validation in her home setting. As an example, she explained, “You know, there were times I performed at a high level and there were times I performed below what I could do, but I do not really recall my parents checking my report card or telling me to study. There was none of that.” In what Rendón shares of her time in high school, there was, however, evidence of interpersonal validation. It was the first time she spoke of making friends as a member of a newly formed debate club; she was affirmed academically and interpersonally as she engaged in public speaking.

At the same time as these instances of validation were present, the experiences she shared were also shaped by an environment where social realities reproduced a master narrative of interpersonal and academic invalidation. Rendón explained,

Because no one had gone to college, no one had graduated from high school, everybody was poor and that was the expectation, that you know quite frankly if I had dropped out of high school or junior high or whatever and gone to work that would have been okay. There was nobody there to say “Wow, this is terrible!” I guess they would have been disappointed, but if I had brought home a check they would have been very happy, and then they would have gotten used to that. And so there was not in my family this

notion that education, particularly higher education, was a realizable, viable goal. In reality, it was more a goal for the affluent, the well-to-do. We were not a part of that culture and ... because we were not a part of their culture, how dare we try to break out of our own culture, because that was what everyone was comfortable with. People were not comfortable with folks breaking out of that culture to get educated and join another culture.

When I asked specifically about validation theory and the role that she thinks validation might have played in her life, she responded:

There was not one person who said, "Laura, you can make it." But there were instances ... when I was in ... accelerated courses.... I knew that when I applied myself I was intelligent and I knew I could succeed. On the other hand, there was another part of me that was like, wow, is this really true and can I really make it? I think what took me over the edge was not someone validating me. I guess I am one of these people that just out of sheer drive and determination make it. I think that was the number one thing that carried me over because quite frankly, there was a lot of invalidation going on as well. I mean my parents were not entirely supportive of me taking off, for example, to the University of Houston. My mother, when I told her I was going to go to college said, "*Estas loca!*" (You are crazy!). A lot of my friends were not going to college, so there were a lot of opportunities for me not to go to college ... so what takes me over the edge in those circumstances? I think knowing that I am smart, I have something that other kids do not have and that if I apply myself I can do it.

College and Beyond

After high school, Rendón wanted to become a teacher. I asked her why.

I guess maybe it was my connection to education, because it was a vehicle for me to become something different, something stable. And the other thing about a culture such as the one in Laredo is that the role models that one sees are very few and teachers are very obvious role models. That is why a lot of students in those cultures, if they go to college, they want to be teachers or they want to be in law enforcement or people that wear uniforms because they are respected; they don't see all the other possibilities. And so, of the possibilities I could see, that was the possibility that made sense for me.

She enrolled at the local community college and described her first year as rough. She worked to help her family out while going to school.

I wanted to help my mother survive. She was upset with me because she wanted me to go to work full-time.... I told her, "Well you have to wait four more years." That was not a happy piece of news, so I think she was resentful of that, but at the same time I knew she was struggling and I said ... I better do something. So there was a period of time that I worked a part-time job Monday through Friday, then Friday night I would go to the restaurant where my mother worked, *The Western Grill*, which was the best restaurant in Laredo at the time, and I would work from 10 o'clock at night until 6 a.m. I remember for the weekend we got paid \$5 plus tips. Unfortunately, Laredo is not a rich area so for tips we got a dime, a quarter. You were in major good luck if you got a dollar. So I always had money in my pocket, but I was starting to feel really tired, so I told my mother I was not going to work at *The Western Grill* anymore. So I was with stuff like work-study, or government programs, or things like that [after that].

Academically, Rendón described herself as underperforming during her first years in college; however, she also described moving forward aided by interpersonal validation.

I guess what got me through ... were people like my friend Raul who was very, very much into colleges and collected catalogues from all over the country. We would sit, we would be on the phone at times, or have a coke and we would talk and talk and talk and talk about college, college, college. He was the one that encouraged me to go to the University of Houston in 1968.

At the University of Houston, the primary experiences Rendón shared were focused on interpersonal interactions and the larger social reality of the Vietnam War. The only person she knew at the University of Houston initially was Raul, who started there before her. At school, almost everyone she met was White. Rendón explained that most students pronounced her name, "Rendin" and thought she too was White. Because of this, she would not get invited to the Latino events on campus. Sharing her experience in Houston, she said,

I lived with White females and we became good friends and I was actually more acclimated to the White culture, believe it or not, in Houston, than I was to the Latino culture, except for my friends like Raul was there and then Jose Carlos came and then Arturo and Manuel and others.

Although Rendón wanted to stay in Houston after graduating with a degree in English and journalism, her father came to take her back to Laredo.

I wanted to work there but my parents had other ideas. To them my moving away was temporary and they wanted me back. I was very angry about that and I considered joining the Peace Corps to really go away, but I came back and said okay, I am going to try it for a year and if I do not like it I am getting out of here. So, I started teaching at the middle school I had attended, Christen Junior High School, eighth grade reading and English. So that is how I started my teaching career.

She was a popular teacher and experienced multiple forms of validation that fostered her self-worth while at Christen.

After I had been at Christen for a while, whenever there were issues that needed leadership, I was one of the people that others turned to.... I began to see myself differently. I began to see that I was a leader and that I was able to make my dreams come true. I was able to do what I set out to do and I was finally doing it.

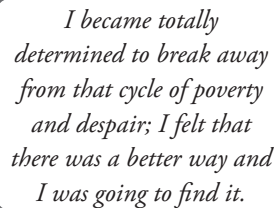
I asked what it was she felt she set out to do.

I saw a lot of suffering in my family. I saw how my mother worked so hard after my parents divorced to help the family survive. There was a great deal of suffering and grief and anger and despair and depression [in] my early years, to the point that when I was in my 20s and early 30s I had forgotten, I mean I did not want to think about it.

It was just too painful to deal with.. But as I was growing up, somewhere along the line, I can not quite put a finger on it, but I said you know this is crazy, this is not going to happen to me...

I became totally determined to break away from that cycle of poverty and

despair; I felt that there was a better way and I was going to find it.



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Rendón was highly visible at Christen Junior High School. She ran the student paper and the yearbook and was a creative teacher always looking for new

ways of becoming more effective. She was appointed to the superintendent's committee looking at the future of schooling, and it was not long before she decided she needed to continue her formal education.

I decided I wanted to pursue my own education—that just having a B.A. was not enough. If I was going to make it in that system or another system I needed to have more education, and I started a master's degree part-time. I would go to Kingsville in the evenings and in the summers to work on my master's degree. I always had this passion for education and for becoming more and for thinking that this is not enough. We have to keep going, we have to just not be settled and comfortable just because we have achieved something. You have to keep going, you have to, you have to explore the new. The cutting edge is what it is about for me. All of my life is about pushing it to a higher level, taking it to another level and not being comfortable settling in because you think you have got it, you know. We have to keep going, we have to keep pushing.

Completing a double master's degree in guidance counseling and psychology, Rendón initially sought out a position as a counselor in the K–12 system, but her superintendent let her know that there were no openings. With the help of a friend who worked at the local community college, she was able to secure a position as a counselor for a Title III grant the summer before she completed her master's degree. She described this as the perfect job for her at the time.

I was having a lot of fun actually at the community college.... I felt great. I felt I connected well with the students. Toward the end of that year there was a crisis in that program and the two people that headed up the program were moved out and the president of the community college asked me to be the director. Again ... here I am the new kid on the block,... [and] I am the one that gets the offer. I knew [those who had been there longer] were upset because it was slighting them, but I thought about it and thought about it and I said well, somebody is going to have to make the decisions about this program and I am either going to be at the end of someone else's decisions that I may or may not agree with or I will make the decisions. And I thought to myself, it may as well be me. So, I took the job and I became the director of that program.

Becoming a Scholar

In the fall of 1979, after four years at the community college, Rendón made the decision to pursue her doctorate at the University of Michigan, a time she described with great fondness.

I had a wonderful experience at Michigan. Michigan opened up a lot of doors for me. When I got there I was very fortunate that we had a very small but very supportive and close group of Latinos, Chicanos. We had socials every weekend; it was a network that provided much of the support I think people in higher education need to have. These were people that were totally committed to education, making a difference for others and themselves and understanding the issues of Latino communities in the U.S. [They were] a group that believed in education and that I felt were going to be the future leaders of this country.

From Christen Junior High School to the University of Michigan, the experiences Rendón described were ones where positive notions of academic and interpersonal validation (such as in her comments above), the attainment of self-confidence, and on-going development through validation feature prominently. Through these experiences, the development of an insider/outsider positionality also became evident. Rendón developed an identity that moved between what Banks (1998) would describe as an indigenous-insider and indigenous-outsider. She endorsed the values, beliefs, and knowledge of her native community and culture, and was at times viewed as a member of that community by its members. At the same time, she assimilated into a different culture and assumed some of the values and beliefs of that community, meaning she may at times have been viewed as an outsider by her native community. This tension between the person she was becoming and her community of origin—on the one hand belonging, and on the other hand being and feeling different—is evident in a story she shared about attending a music event while in graduate school at the University of Michigan.

When I was in Laredo, Texas, in my teens there used to be a band called Sunny and the Sunliners ... from San Antonio, Texas. Their most famous [and] only hit nationwide was “Talk to Me,” but they were very, very famous locally and they would come down to Laredo and we always looked forward to this because we loved Sunny and the Sunliners. So when I went

to Michigan, [even though] the band was not as popular any more, it was kind of like [an] oldies kind of thing. Some friends said, “You know, Sunny and the Sunliners are playing in Detroit,” and so there were some of us there from Texas that said, “Oh let’s go! Lets go!” And so we went to Detroit. It was a dance hall, very similar to the dance halls where Sunny and the Sunliners appeared when we were teenagers, and it was all low-income, you know, Hispanic people [in the audience], mainly from Michigan because they were working in the fields, farming, and or in factories and things like that, working-class. And I remember going there, I was 31 years old, Sunny and the Sunliners were playing, and I was looking around and I saw these people who represented who I was and I said, I am going to do something for you. I just said that to myself, I am going to do something for you.

Reflecting on this process of change as her positionality shifted she noted:

The reality is that in order to make it and succeed there is a certain disconnection that will take place. There are certain concessions you have to make. I think many people who come from a similar experience and similar background [to mine] and go to a university ... do not stop to think about these things. We do not reflect [on these things]. We simply go through life and then all of sudden we notice that something is missing or [that] there is a void ... a sadness and we cannot quite come to grips with it, because this really requires [that we become] ... reflective participant[s] [in our own lives].

This tension is something Rendón (1992) explored in “From the Barrio to the Academy,” an article she wrote as a response to Rodriguez’s (1974) essay “Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy,” which later became a part of his famous book, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (2004). I asked her about why she wrote the article:

I have to tell you that when I read it [*Going Home Again*], I was not totally in agreement with the criticisms that I had heard. I was not sure that it was disrespectful, for example, but I felt on the other hand that something was missing in Richard’s piece, that people needed to hear another side. I think part of that was that I do not feel that you totally need to disconnect from your culture, that yes there is going to be some disconnection but for you to think that you have to totally break away and that you have to forget

Spanish and be someone else and not you, I think [is] ... asking too much of a person and being disrespectful to a person's culture.

As Rendón spoke of life in the academy and the consequences of the need to make concessions, it was evident these types of experiences heavily influenced her later work on spirituality in education. Further reflecting on what it meant to be a first-generation college student, she discussed some of the long conversations she would have with friends at the University of Michigan about their futures and the impact they hoped to have.

One of the things that I noticed was that all of us kind of came from the same kinds of experiences. I mean, not exactly the same, but certainly we knew poverty. We knew how our families were and we would joke around about these things and [at the same time] we would talk about our futures. I think at that level [of education] the thinking begins to be more analytical. You are faced with information that you did not have before, and you say wait a minute, what is really going on here and what role do I play and what am I going to do? What is going to be my piece? How am I going to use this education to make a difference?

The memories Rendón shared about the ways her location shifted in relation to power over time tell a story of how she moved from experiencing validation to providing validation. At Christen Junior High, she worked to be responsive in her style of teaching and choice of content, working with a student body she viewed herself as knowing well as a result of her own experience. At Laredo Community College she experienced others as seeing the community college as the slums of education. She described people seeing the students as “the kids nobody wanted,” and so she focused on faculty accountability, academics, and programmatic integrity to turn this around. Speaking about validating students today, she described her current classroom practices:

I bring who I am to my class. I am more conscious of that along the years and communicate to students in different ways that they too are change agents, that they too are going to say they are the future leaders of our country and of our educational system and that the way they behave and the way they think and the way they act and what they write and what they do must go beyond coming to an 8–5 job, and that going beyond is about

reaching out to the less fortunate and making a difference, challenging structures and ways of operation that do not seem to make sense, taking research to a higher level, and I am very committed to that.

Recognizing her current location of privilege and power, she touched on how she hoped her later work on spirituality in education and what she called *sentipensante* (sensing/thinking) pedagogy might contribute to validating the scholarship of junior scholars.

I speak from a privileged powerful position of being a full professor [with] tenure. I do not really have to please anybody and so that gives me a lot of freedom and a lot of latitude [in my scholarship], and if that freedom and latitude can help junior professors coming up who feel the same way [about the role of spirituality in higher education] to do their work, then I am giving voice to them right now and that is more important to me at this stage [in my career].

During our interview, I became curious about how Rendón views social change. How does she believe it happens? What is it that we need to do to create a more socially just and equitable education system? In responding to these questions, Rendón spoke of her own work and changing the academy from the inside.

I think it is important that I do it within the system because people that want to do this have to realize that they do not have to go outside. They do not have to go outside, it should not be something that requires that someone change structures. To some extent I think they are going to change but ... if we were to say in order to do this you have got to change every structure, you have got to go outside the academy, you have to do all these things, then I think that would be tremendous risk-taking and laborious for a lot of people, because quite frankly we do not have that kind of time. People need to feel that wherever they are and in whatever way they feel comfortable they can begin. The way I do things is going to be very different from the way you do things and how somebody else does things, and we have to respect that. I think ultimately structures will change, they will need to change, but I do not think that communicating to people that they have to do things that are extremely laborious and that everybody has to do things in the same way and that you are going to be needing all these

experts and all of that is the best way to proceed. I mean, I did it out of a calling, I did it out of what I felt was a void in my life.

The way Rendón described the changes that brought her where she is today made it clear that she views choice as a salient factor. In high school, she viewed her environment as providing four possible choices: getting married, going into the armed services, becoming a nun, or going to college. And she chose college. As a junior high school teacher, she made a choice to pursue her master's degree and become a counselor. After being a counselor for a number of years, she chose to begin working toward her doctorate. As a doctoral student, she chose how she would give back to her community. In her current position in the academy, she views herself as having great freedom of choice.

In listening to Rendón grapple with the notion of choice, I experienced a tension in her answers between the notion of individual responsibility and choice and the role of structural realities in individual experiences. She understands her experience as one where she made it through by sheer determination and successful choices. At one point in the interview, she described recognizing the importance of education as a child and her determination to attain it: "The message was that education is important, and the more you had to me was a ticket out of poverty. There was a ticket out of struggling to survive. The ticket was education, and I was going to get that ticket." She described her family as instilling in her "the values of determination, education, and self-motivation." The role of the individual is also present in her engagement of some of the critiques of her work on validation.

As a student you have a responsibility to do the best that you can, to learn to access resources, to submit high quality work, to put your best foot forward, to develop networks with others, to learn how to use the library, to express yourself well, to write well, to do everything that you can to become a totally successful college student. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people who see my work and others like it sometimes misread it and say that we are dismissing the role of the student. I would disagree with that. I think students definitely have a responsibility to do what they can to succeed.

On the other hand, it is clear that concomitantly she is cognizant of the role of larger structural realities. Discussing her first introduction to Cross's (1971) work illustrates this powerfully. "I remember reading Pat Cross's book which was

Beyond the Open Door, and that made me cry because I thought to myself, she is writing about me and I had no idea that anybody cared about students like me.” Although Rendón suggests that change can happen from the inside and need not be focused on structural change, she also understands the need for structural change. This was particularly clear as she reflected on Rodriguez’s (1974) *Going Home Again* and the changes that first-generation students experience in college.

The academy should also change. It is not ... like we have to do all the changing. There are certain structures and behaviors and conventions and traditions within the academy that also need to be changed and ... I do not believe Richard addressed those. It was more that the student has to change, but he does not really say anything about the institution making any changes.

As we continued to talk, she also spoke of her own complicity in the status quo and her efforts to show up in the world differently.

There are issues that arise and what it makes me think [of] is that as far as we have come, the other values as *so* entrenched. I mean, they are entrenched in me too, sometimes I have to wake up Laura you know, slap myself because I am thinking along the same lines. They are so entrenched that it makes me think my God, I have to start, it is like starting at ground zero, step one and even before step one, prestep one. If you have not taken the time to process, to read, to think, to critically reflect, if all you have read is a line of Laura Rendón or Parker Palmer or Angeles Arrien or whatever and you read that quote, you say, well this is very nice but then ... [if] the next thing you do is the same old thing, then that is not what is required here. We have got to go beyond quotes and passages to deeper reflection and deeper analysis, and so I think that is going to be part of the steps that I need to take in order to lift this movement [spirituality in education] and move it along, because I think that even with people who are open, this becomes very challenging because again, all of us have the kind of training that is so much a part of us, that it is difficult for us to see another way. My life now is about the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth way. And so maybe that is my role, to sort of be the insider/outsider that has been privileged and blessed with having the space and the positioning to be able to serve as an agent that can present the other ways or at least steer us toward other ways. No matter what I do people can not fire me. Maybe I can be ostracized but there are ways to get around those things, because I think that I am not the only one in the

academy doing this and I am ok with that, if that is what has to be my role, then that's what has to be my role.

As our last conversation drew to a close, I asked Rendón about her thoughts for the future.

What is going to be my legacy? What am I going to leave behind? After all of this is said and done, what do I want to be remembered for? Clearly, what I think I will be remembered for is that I made a difference in the lives of people who grew up like me having no hope, and I made a difference in folks thinking about the world in a much more connected, humanistic, holistic way. I think at this point in my life, those could be two things that I would care very much about, and I think that the essence of both of those things are love.... The essence of those things is that that I learned how to give and how to receive love, so that will be my legacy.

Through her narrative, Rendón revealed a passion for education, a drive to succeed, and a yearning to make change and inspire others. At the same time, her narrative also revealed the tensions and contradictions of life and of desire. Highlighting the interplay between how we construct ourselves and the knowledge we produce, Rendón's narrative contextualized the experiences that laid the foundation for her work on validation theory. Hence, to come to know validation theory is to know a part of Laura Rendón.

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From the Field

Validation Theory and Student Success: The UTEP Way

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Introduction

“UTEP’s long-standing commitment over the last two decades has been to reject the traditional choice between access and excellence that characterized U.S. higher education in the twentieth century and to insist upon the joint attainment and continuing enhancement of both access and excellence” (UTEP, 2010).

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is the only Texas research university within about 350 miles of El Paso. It serves one of the largest international border metroplex areas in one of the most economically challenged and undereducated communities in the nation. Acutely conscious of its responsibility to serve students well, UTEP long ago committed itself to finding new and better ways to get students into the university and to graduate them with the best possible education. That commitment is explicitly stated in its mission and vision statements and reflected in past and present accomplishments and strategic planning for the future. These accomplishments range from student success—UTEP was selected as one of 20 schools “Documenting Effective Educational Practice” (Project DEEP) as detailed in *Student Success in College* (Kuh et al., 2005)—to athletics (documented in the 2006 film *Glory Road*) to research (designated by the Texas Legislature in House Bill 51 as one of seven emerging national research universities).

UTEP is becoming the first national research university in the United States that serves a 21st century demographic: a predominantly Mexican American urban population. Students are drawn primarily from West Texas but also from across Texas and the United States. UTEP President Diana Natalicio (2010) recently characterized the challenge as follows:

In Texas—and indeed across the U.S.—higher education is locked in a traditional model better suited to the mid-20th century America than today. Demographics have shifted dramatically, driven largely by the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, and it's time to recognize that low-income and minority students have every right to expect the same level of educational excellence experienced by their peers in more affluent settings. Texas' future prosperity resides in these undereducated segments of our population. We literally cannot succeed without setting high expectations for them and fully developing their talents.

UTEP's responsibility to its students and to the State of Texas is to demonstrate that a commitment to both access and excellence—to both "Closing the Gaps" and "Tier One" goals—can and must be achieved. We have been highly successful over the past 20 years in building research and doctoral program capacity while maintaining our strong access commitment to first-generation, low-income and mostly Hispanic students, who also happen to be highly talented. We intend to continue to build on that success to achieve our Tier One goal, for and with the UTEP students we serve, not in spite of them. They—and Texas—should expect nothing less. (para. 7–8)

Twenty years of institutional transformation and focus on student success includes these illustrative highlights:

- UTEP's student demographics from two decades ago portray a university serving a minority of the region's population. Today, UTEP's student population closely mirrors the socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural make-up of the El Paso community.
- Fifteen years ago, first-year retention and success rates were identified as a critical area for improvement leading to the development of our nationally recognized Entering Students Program.

- Within the past decade, the University transformed itself from a primarily undergraduate and master’s level institution into a Carnegie Research Intensive university. UTEP ranks fourth in federal research funding among all Texas public universities and has increased the number of doctoral programs from one to eighteen.

Access and Validation

UTEP’s focus on access and success through validation is critical to the El Paso region. More than 55% of the Fall 2009 freshman class self-reported that they are the first in their families to pursue a college degree, while only 18.9% of persons 25 and older in El Paso County have a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 25.1% in Texas and 27.4% nationally).

UTEP has identified four components of access that are critical to validating in students the belief that they can and should pursue a higher education. Addressing each of the components from a validation perspective helps transition students into pathways to success.

TABLE 1 | Access Components

Aspirational access	Academic access	Financial access	Participatory access
Build a college-going culture in a region with a high first-generation population	Create college readiness programming to give area students the academic skills necessary for success in higher education	Develop resources and awareness of them for a community with a household median income well below the state and national average	Provide robust support systems and alternative pathways to degree completion

The first two components, aspirational and academic access, are closely intertwined. First, exposure to a college-going culture is needed to validate a student’s belief in the possibility of attaining a higher education. That belief is then supported by programs that strengthen the K–12 academic experience with the academic rigor necessary for success. Once students believe that college is within their reach and possess the academic capacity for higher studies, the next component, financial access, is critical. Assistance must be provided to students whose personal and family finances are very limited if they are to continue on the pathway to postsecondary education. Without scholarships, grants, loans, affordable tuition and fees, and opportunities for on-campus employment, the

college dreams of low-income students and their preparations for success will end. As the primary four-year public university serving this economically challenged and undereducated community, UTEP is acutely conscious of its responsibility to keep the cost of a high quality education affordable.

Students must also be afforded participatory access. They need the full range of academic support and delivery systems adapted to the demands of their lives. Those demands vary greatly, but include full-time employment, families and children, and limited resources. The opportunities that provide participatory access include evening and weekend classes, online opportunities, off-campus classes, specialized labs, and other supports. UTEP's view is that there is more to access than getting students enrolled. Only sustained attention and validation at all levels ensure that students enter, progress through, and complete their degree programs.

Validation Theory

The theoretical foundation for UTEP's student success plan is in validation theory: validation through encouragement and affirmation can be the factor that determines success or failure. Rendón (1994) defined *validation* as:

An enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development (p. 44).

Academic validation results when faculty, staff, or others reach out to students in ways that help the individual "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 44). According to Rendón (1994), involvement and validation appear to have distinct elements. Involvement is about how much time, energy, and effort students devote to university work and activities. Traditional student success models suggest that the more time and effort students devote to learning and the more intensely they engage, the greater their achievement and their satisfaction with educational experiences—thus leading to persistence in college (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Validation theory pushes scholars to think beyond mere involvement and to understand that validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process.

Aspirational and Academic Access

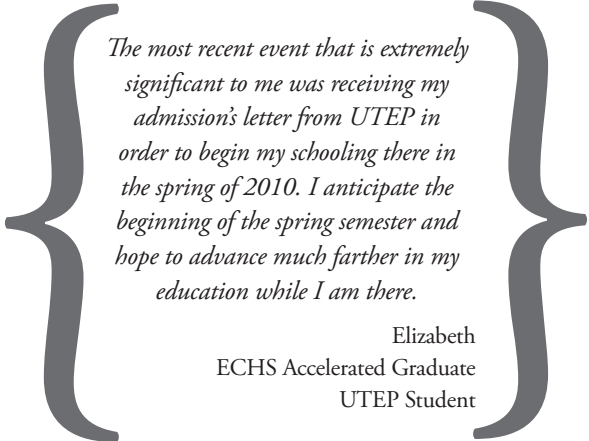
Aspirational and Academic Access are the foundation for the other areas of access and should be developed from early years. Additionally, assurance of

both aspiration and academic abilities is not a one-time fix. Our students are continually met with challenges that require repeated aspirational and academic encouragement throughout the time of their studies in higher education in order to successfully complete their degrees.

Early College High Schools (ECHS) are dramatically accelerating student progress through UTEP. These special high schools focus on “preparing students who have been average or below average academic performers, or who are low income, first-generation ... for success in secondary and postsecondary education” (Early College High School Initiative, 2010) and are designed for students to complete their associate degree while they complete their high school diploma.

The first group of El Paso’s ECHS students, 23 students from Mission Early College High School (MECHS), graduated in May 2009 with their associate degree from El Paso Community College (EPCC) at the end of their junior year of high school and entered UTEP as university juniors in fall 2009. An additional 42 Mission students completed their EPCC associate degree in December 2009 and entered UTEP in spring 2010. These students were able to enter UTEP as full juniors while concurrently enrolled in their senior year of high school. All 65 students chose to attend UTEP. These accelerated students are being mentored to develop their plans for graduate and professional school during their junior year. They are typically 17–19 years of age, Hispanic, from low-income families, with many declaring an interest in majoring in STEM fields.

How did they do? The initial 23 students earned an average 3.44 GPA in their first semester at UTEP, with seven students earning a 4.0. In their second semester, they earned an average 3.45 GPA with eight students earning a 4.0.



The most recent event that is extremely significant to me was receiving my admission's letter from UTEP in order to begin my schooling there in the spring of 2010. I anticipate the beginning of the spring semester and hope to advance much farther in my education while I am there.

Elizabeth
ECHS Accelerated Graduate
UTEP Student

There are currently five ECHS campuses in the El Paso area with one more scheduled to open in the fall of 2011 for a combined total of up to 600 graduates each year. UTEP is working with each school district and EPCC to be the university of choice for these students. The validating message to students traditionally underrepresented in higher education that they are invited, wanted, and will be supported in completing a college degree is also being extended across the El Paso region through federally funded, UTEP managed grant programs.

College readiness math. Once new students arrive at UTEP, an integrated web of programs eases their transition to the undergraduate experience. This web of programs has been designed to ensure that students with a wide range of needs are provided with supports at each critical juncture to ensure progress and success in the crucial first year and ultimately lead to graduation. That experience begins with Enhanced New Student Orientation (ENSO). One of the features of ENSO is specifically designed to support students in enrolling in college-level rather than developmental courses. For students who do not place into college-level math prior to ENSO, a six hour math refresher is provided, as well as an opportunity to retake the math placement exam. As a result of these ENSO math workshops, 50% of students place at least one math course higher.

For those whose placement does not improve, UTEP offers another opportunity. The Mastering Developmental Math (MDM) program provides them with the opportunity to improve math skills and place into college-level math. This self-paced summer program started in 2007 at the request of the provost and is offered by the developmental mathematics department at UTEP. The program allows the students to complete their developmental math courses using an online system called ALEKS. The program is free to students. The success of these two strategic refresher efforts has made a significant difference in enabling new UTEP students to get off to the best start on their progress toward a degree. College math, a barrier for many students, especially minority students, becomes a validating experience when students succeed and realize they belong in college and will be successful. The MDM program has not only reduced the time it takes students to complete their developmental math courses, but has also increased their pass rates to and through their first college-level math course.

*The best thing about the program was that I was able to work at my own pace.
I didn't have to worry about falling behind or being too ahead.*

*I feel that I am prepared for college math and feel very confident because my
mind is crisper and more full of knowledge than before.*

I love that it was at my own pace and it had a flexible schedule.

Comments from summer 2010 MDM student evaluations

Mine Tracker. Documenting and validating a student's extra- and cocurricular activities is another way to support aspirational access and build on the skills and knowledge gained in the academic classroom setting. A common practice at universities across the country is to document out-of-class student engagement and accomplishment with a cocurricular transcript, and the stated purpose of those transcripts is remarkably uniform across universities.

UTEP's Mine Tracker, however, is a cocurricular transcript with a twist. Instead of a passive self-reporting site where students list their activities outside the classroom, Mine Tracker serves as a student's roadmap to success. A cocurriculum developed in collaboration with the academic colleges guides students in the selection of out-of-class experiences. The prescribed engagement opportunities are designed to develop four learning dimensions: career development, civic engagement, global perspective, and personal enrichment. Each dimension has three stages: entering student, engagement, and leadership. A student's progress through the stages is tracked and displayed on their personal screen on the Mine Tracker website, and the report is issued as their official University Cocurricular Transcript.

UTEP is committed to developing among low-income, minority, and first generation students the desire to attend and the skills necessary to succeed in higher education. Many strategies are employed to achieve this goal, including the aggressive application for federally funded grants. The university now has one of the largest portfolios in the nation of TRIO and other federally funded grant programs, with \$9.3 million in annual expenditures. These programs and many others at the university serve the students enrolled in the programs and

many thousands more through broad-based initiatives in partnership with local school districts and the community college.

Financial Access

During the past six years, UTEP has developed new ways to help students and their families understand that higher education is financially within their reach. Most recently, the university has sought to increase the financial literacy of its students. First-generation college students often struggle in their transition to and through their college careers because they simply do not have critical information about the demands of college life. Budgeting, managing debt—especially credit card debt—and maintaining a stable cash flow are often difficult for college students, and especially for first-generation students. To help assure that students do not dig themselves into financial holes that force them to stop or drop out of school, the university's Division of Student Affairs created the Money Matters program. A website for the program has been developed featuring video and learning tools, available at <http://moneymatters.utep.edu>.

Participatory Access

Participatory access involves acknowledging the complicated and demanding lives of our students. We must continue to offer expanded catalogs of online, weekend, and evening classes and services. Online and hybrid classes may be offered in flexible formats such as 8-week or 16-week courses to fit varied schedules. But, in addition to classes, universities must think about offering services such as 24-hour access to libraries, academic advising, business services, and more as we begin to serve a world-wide population. El Paso is fortunate to be the home of Fort Bliss, the Army's second largest military installation in the United States. The opportunity to work with soldiers and their families is one that is challenging UTEP's academic and student services to think creatively on how this population can best be served through both face to face interactions as well as technology enhanced support.

Conclusion

Over twenty years ago, The University of Texas at El Paso committed itself to provide the very best education to all students and put into place a coordinated, interconnected set of strategies—a system of excellence—to make that

commitment a reality. As a result, UTEP has dramatically increased the number of university undergraduates from the El Paso area who after graduation go on to succeed in roles as varied as educators in El Paso area schools, the presidents of both the American Medical Association (AMA) and the National Medical Association(NMA), and a mission specialist to the International Space Station. UTEP's success in providing opportunity to a traditionally underserved community and validating students' place in higher education demonstrates that access and excellence can, and indeed must, be pursued together. As it progresses in its quest to become the first national research university serving a 21st century demographic, and as it does so by serving its undergraduates, not in spite of them, UTEP will continue to explore and develop innovative strategies that will serve as a model for Texas and for the rest of the country.

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Fostering a Therapeutic Learning Environment: Highline Community College

Rolita Flores Ezeonu

Highline Community College

Introduction

Highline Community College participates in Achieving the Dream, a multiyear national initiative that promotes institutional change to improve student success, especially for students who have been marginalized in the community college environment (immigrants, refugees, students of color, and students in low socioeconomic situations). Participating colleges strive to create a culture of inquiry, evidence, and accountability by identifying barriers that prevent students from advancing through college programs and using the information to shift institutional policies, practices, and priorities. At Highline Community College, a main focus of Achieving the Dream is the transition and retention of students from noncredit basic skills classes like adult basic education (ABE) and English-as-a-second language (ESL) into college-level credit classes and then to graduation.

Rendón (1994) states that community colleges, colleges, and universities should focus on four key areas to transform students who would otherwise leave college. They are orienting faculty and staff to the needs and strengths of culturally diverse student populations, training faculty to validate students, fostering a validating classroom, and fostering a therapeutic learning community both in-and out- of class. More specifically, Rendón (1994) argues that, “The role of the institution in fostering validation is active, it involves faculty, counselors, coaches, and administrators actively reaching out to students or designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth among students, faculty, and staff” (p. 44).

These principles form the cornerstones of Highline Community College’s work with its large and diverse ESL population. The college’s ESL-to-Credit intervention fosters a therapeutic learning community through collaboration and the individual efforts of faculty, staff, and administrators across the college campus in working together to provide validating experiences for students.

Background

The dramatically changing demographics in Highline's South King County district, some 20 miles south of Seattle, are reflected in the profile of students at the college itself. Over the past decade, growing numbers of recent immigrants, refugees, and adults in low-income situations have been drawn to the college's neighborhoods by the area's lower cost housing and its plentiful entry-level jobs, particularly within the travel and hospitality sector at nearby Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. As a result, Highline is the largest ABE/ESL provider in the state of Washington (Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, 2010). In addition, Highline Community College is the most diverse college in the state of Washington at 65% students of color (Highline Community College, 2010).

Between 2005 and 2009, ABE/ESL enrollments grew 35%. These enrollments now comprise over 30% of the entire college's student population. In addition, these students are extraordinarily diverse. Only 20% of students within the ABE/ESL population self-report their race as White, compared to the 34% who self-report as White for the college as a whole. Latino students make up over 35% of the ABE/ESL population, more than triple the rate of Latino representation (12% college-wide) (Wagnitz, 2007).

Yet, the transition of students from the highest level of ESL into for-credit certification and degree programs has been disappointingly small. At Highline Community College, the ESL classes range according to the English language proficiency skill level of students in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Classes start at ESL Level 1, considered the beginning noncredit class, and progress to ESL Level 5, considered the highest level noncredit class. Institutional data (Wagnitz, 2007) indicates that only 22% of ESL students transitioned from high-intermediate noncredit classes (Level Four) to the highest level noncredit classes (Level Five). In 2005–2006, only 7% of Level Four and Five students (86 out of 1,156 students) went on to take college credit level classes, while only 3% of all reached 15 college-level credits.

The low transition rates do not result from a lack of student interest. Institutional focus-group surveys ($n = 72$) in 2005–2006 revealed that as many as 95% of Level Four students wanted to enroll in degree or certificate programs (Wagnitz, 2007). Students stated that the barriers to pursuing these goals came largely in financial

challenges, a lack of clear information on college offerings and services, and the need for a personal connection to the institution. Furthermore, focus groups with ABE/ESL faculty (n = 49) confirmed these impressions.

How the Initiative Works

The goal of the ESL-to-Credit intervention is to increase the rates of transition by 5% among Level Four and Five ESL completers, with the longer term goal of increasing students' persistence to the "momentum points" benchmarks: college-readiness, 15 college credits, 30 credits that propel learners toward the "tipping point" of 45 credits, and a credential, where students' economic status is impacted (Prince & Jenkins, 2005).

To reach these goals, the college needs to address the obstacles that students have themselves identified. Accordingly, Highline's ESL-to-Credit intervention strategy focuses on creating a network of information sources, resources, and referral systems that consistently incorporate student validation along the way.

Rendón (1994) described ways that the community college educator can promote this validation. In colleges where interpersonal validation is valued, faculty and staff are available to students in-and out- of class and the college promotes pride in cultural, gender, and sexual orientation through college-sponsored activities and organizations in which students are encouraged to help each other inside and outside of the classroom.

From the beginning, Highline's Achieving the Dream initiative incorporated these qualities. In the effort's first phase, faculty and staff from across the campus community volunteered their time and trained as transitional advisors. The goals of the transitional advisors are to reach out to students through visits into the ESL classroom, to provide students one-on-one academic advising, and to provide student success workshops, to name a few. Eventually, the intervention grew to encompass the creation and implementation of a staffed Transition Referral and Resource Center (TRRC), a space focused on welcoming students into the college environment. The TRRC provides a safe and validating space for students transitioning from noncredit to credit classes and, additionally, to graduation.

Work Processes and Resources

During Year One (2007–2008) of Achieving the Dream, Highline Community College's initial one-to-one advising initiative focused on developing materials and training sessions to support 14 volunteer transitional advisors. Faculty from ESL, precollege credit level and college-level departments, along with staff from across the campus signed on as transitional advisors. The volunteers and their supporters represented a wide cross-section of the campus community, including faculty, program coordinators and directors, deans, staff advisors, and the vice president of instruction.

By Year Two (2008–2009), the TRRC was able to provide a visible and stable organizational home for advising activities, informational materials, class visits, workshops, and drop-in referral services. During this year, two individuals staffed the TRRC with the support of the volunteer transitional advisors.

In Year Three (200–2010), the TRRC support was available to all Level Four and Five students, with approximately 350 students taking advantage of services each academic quarter. Twenty-one transitional advisors participated that year.

Institutional data confirm that the three years of work paid dividends in student achievement. In Year One (2007–2008), the transition rates doubled from 3% to 6%. In 2008–2009, the transition rates moved to 20%. Though final figures for 2009–2010 are not yet available, fall 2009 data suggests that the transition rate is on track to exceed 2008–2009's level (Benton, 2010).

The ESL-to-Credit intervention is funded through Achieving the Dream, with a \$50,000 allotment dedicated to the planning year and \$100,000 allotments dedicated to each of the remaining four years of the initiative. Throughout the process, administrative leadership within the college also combined existing funds to leverage and further the ESL-to-Credit intervention.

Attributes and Problems in Development and Implementation

Throughout the development and implementation of the ESL-to-Credit intervention at Highline Community College, several key success elements surfaced. One is the support and innovation of faculty, staff, and administrative

leaderships. Having widespread leadership that extends itself into all parts of the college provides continuity and consistency throughout the institutional culture and environment. Specifically, a key support from faculty and staff is the role of the transitional advisors. Advising is a key component of a faculty member's workload; thus the transitional advisor role fit into the responsibilities of being a faculty member. Additionally, the willingness from staff who are educational advisors to volunteer their time as transitional advisor is extremely valuable. The faculty and staff transitional advisors are already working with ESL students who are transitioning; thus the transitional advisors focus on educating and encouraging students toward their educational or professional goals. They meet with students 2–3 times during each quarter to help them navigate the college. Also, the critical support of administration in providing financial resources through stipends and release time is an imperative.

Another strategy that has provided an important transition into credit-level classes for students is the Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) model. The I-BEST model brings ABE/GED (General Education Development)/ESL instructors and college-level professional technical faculty together to design and teach college-level occupational courses for students. Instruction in basic skills is integrated with instruction in college-level career-technical skills. The I-BEST model challenges the conventional notion that basic skills instruction ought to be completed by students prior to starting college-level courses. The approach thus offers the potential to accelerate the transition of adult basic skills to college programs.

Students interested in transitioning enroll into I-BEST classes with the intention of moving one step closer to their academic goals. The I-BEST model provides a classroom experience in which student goals are validated and students are encouraged to accomplish their goals. Faculty's curriculum and instruction foster active learning and a space for students to share their knowledge and strength in the classroom. Further, the I-BEST classroom creates an environment where relationships are central. Through the TRRC staff's efforts in providing orientation and coaching for students, the number of students learning about I-BEST and enrolling in I-BEST is continually increasing.

One of the main challenges during this process is in the paradigm of how individuals in higher education view students who take below college-level

classes. Increased dialogue on the concept of transition and what that means for the students inside and outside the classroom must lead to a broader understanding of students' success and retention college-wide. For example, Highline, discovered that financial aid and assistance were areas that needed further examining. Students who are in noncredit classes, where quarterly fees are \$25, notice a drastic change in cost when enrolling in their credit level classes (precollege and college-credit level) that cost \$80 per credit hour. To assure that this sudden increase doesn't derail students, institutions must be open to different models that look at a variety of ways to financially assist students when it comes to funding their education.

Applicability

What Highline has learned from its ESL-to-Credit initiative may apply to other higher education institutions. Institutions should keep the following factors in mind: the need for both support and leadership within all levels of the institution, an openness of faculty and staff to participate in dialogue and take action, the institution's willingness to have a data-driven culture, and the openness of individuals on campus to rethink the paradigms of ABE/ESL and developmental education as viewed from both the past and the present.

Throughout the years of Achieving the Dream, the ESL-to-Credit intervention team has made concerted efforts to bring people from all across the campus together to achieve this common goal. Faculty from noncredit and credit classrooms are continually discussing new methods and approaches that will hopefully create more validating ways for students to transition from noncredit to credit classes. More importantly, faculty and staff consistently look at curriculum and instruction that draws on the strengths of the students in the campus community.

In addition, faculty, staff, and administrators must carefully examine current intervention models, both inside and outside of the classroom, that are implemented with students. Providing one type of model may not serve the "whole" student or the student's long-term academic goals. By failing to recognize this fact, institutions may inadvertently create barriers for students by placing them in a single-tracked model instead of providing options that nurture the individual student's goals. For instance, if an advisor coaches a student to look at only one type of degree or career track, it may prevent the student from looking at all of the options that are in front of them.

Lastly, on the state and national level, leaders who make policy decisions need to be aware of what strengths and barriers students bring to the table, as well as the ones they face when they enter and persist in the institution. Policymakers need to be accountable to students when thinking about what student experiences mean for current structures within community colleges and whether these structures are culturally relevant to these students. Our institutional structures inside and outside of the classroom were not originally made for the growing diversity of students that we have now. Due to these changing demographics, the curriculum, instruction, and experiences inside and outside of the classroom should reflect this diversity. More specifically, Rendón states:

There is no reason why institutional life cannot be therapeutic in nature. A college culture that promotes healthy relationships among students, faculty, and staff, fosters cultural pride, and recognizes the potential of all students to attain success is key to the full development of today's college students. (p. 49)

Higher education leaders and, in this case, community college leaders have an obligation to look at access in a holistic manner and think about what that truly means for people of color, immigrants, refugees, and students who are in low-socioeconomic situations. Policymakers must have courageous conversations and not be closed to innovation and creativity.

Future Status

To meet the needs of its diverse student body, Highline Community College continues to collaborate and look at different intervention strategies while utilizing the strengths of students themselves to shape new models for increasing student success. The TRRC staff interviewed students who have successfully transitioned and graduated in hopes of showcasing these success stories on a larger level. These student stories and their pictures are displayed within the TRRC space and website. For those students who have not yet transitioned, the student success stories may provide encouragement. To increase its outreach, the TRRC has augmented its classroom visits with visits to the surrounding communities and school districts (cities, K–12 schools, and community organizations) that Highline Community College geographically serves. For example, Highline partners with a nonprofit organization to offer an I-BEST in Business Technology class within the community. Furthermore, there is constant

evaluation and discussion among administrators, faculty, and staff as to how the TRRC or other promising interventions can be improved.

Lessons Learned

Students of color, immigrants, refugees, and students in low-socioeconomic situations who are new to college culture need to know how to navigate the college environment. It takes time for students to adjust and find strategies that are effective. Basic skills students in particular may have different expectations of what college is and may not be aware of challenges that they may encounter when moving from noncredit to credit classes. Yet, if the institution provides the tools to navigate the college system within a safe and comfortable environment, students can move forward and begin to see themselves as college students who can succeed.

It is the responsibility of the community college to continue to provide access while continuing to critique historical and current instructional and student-support models to see if these models are culturally relevant and timely for all students who enter the institution. In Highline's continuing work with ESL-to-Credit transition, the conversation across campus that involves faculty, staff, and administrators allows for innovation and creativity that is applicable both inside and outside of the classroom. Today, for example, faculty from noncredit classrooms collaborate with their credit level counterparts on assignments and instructional approaches that help to provide students with a seamless transition from one area to another.

Rendón (1994) provides an important framework for guiding Highline Community College's ESL-to-Credit intervention. Through this framework, which recognizes the impact of both validating and invalidating experiences on students, Highline has established a strong foundation for faculty, staff, and administrators in planning future strategies to foster a therapeutic environment for all learners.

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