URBAN-SCHOOLED LATINA/OS, ACADEMIC LITERACIES, AND IDENTITIES: (RE)CONCEPTUALIZING COLLEGE READINESS

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Abstract:
This qualitative case study focuses on the early college experiences of five Latina/o urban-schooled students who graduated in the top 10% of their high school class, guaranteeing them admission into a prestigious four year state university. Although all participated in transition initiatives, and initially felt equipped to participate in university academics, they experienced both common and unique challenges that caused them to negotiate their student identities. By focusing on connections between identities and academic literacies, we argue for a need to (re)conceptualize college readiness in light of the identity negotiations (or processes) inherent in students' experiences in the cultural world of the university.

INTRODUCTION

Latina/os constitute 12.5% (35.7 million) of the total population, and projections indicate that Latina/os will become 30% of the total population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Unfortunately, Latina/os' enrollment in higher education has not followed the same growth pattern. They represent only 9% of the total college population in the nation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002), and the post-secondary attrition of Latina/os means that only 46% of Latino/as who enroll in college receive a bachelor's degree, with around 10% of Latino/as aged 24-64 graduating from four-year institutions (Oseguera, Locks & Vega, 2009). Additionally, researchers have documented that more Latina/os than other racial/ethnic groups are first generation students; that is, they are often the first in their families to attend a university (Pascarella, Pierson , Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004).

With these statistics as a backdrop, it becomes clear that understanding the college experiences of Latino/as and first generation college-goers is critical for identifying the strategies that these students employ to succeed in college, despite the deficit-oriented perspectives that have been shown to be inherent in the university system (Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999) and that often position them inferiorly. Moreover, understanding these students' abilities to navigate academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998) and chronicling their experiences is imperative. Some of these experiences are common with many student populations, and others are decidedly unique, but all are important to assisting Latina/os with the goal of post-secondary persistence. Educators and researchers need to hear more stories from traditionally underserved minority students in order to better serve them.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the first year experiences of a group of first generation Latina/o college students as they navigated a large, predominately White, state university. We focus on the ways in which their navigation of academic literacies impacted their identity development and the (re)construction of their identities as college students. The research questions that guided our study were: 1) What are participants' perceptions of the process of navigating academic literacies at the university?, and 2) How does this process impact their identity negotiations?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to better conceptualize this group of first generation Latina/o college students' early college experiences, we connect the literature from identity studies and academic literacies to the literature on college and career readiness. In doing so, our work offers new perspective and depth to these theories, forcing them to become interrelated as a means of framing students' academic experiences. We also believe that the notion and definition of college readiness ought to be reconceptualized based on findings from studies like ours—case studies of first-generation Latina/o college students.

Identities and the University

We view the university as a cultural world, as defined by Holland and colleagues (1998). Cultural worlds are "socially produced,

culturally constructed activities;" they are historical phenomena people enter into, or into which individuals are recruited (pp. 40-41). We argue that identities are not fixed or stagnant. Instead, they are fluid and multiple (Holland, et al, 1998) as people are always in a state of "becoming not being" (Urrieta, 2007). Likewise, the cultural worlds in which people participate and are allowed or denied access to impact not only how they identify themselves, but the ways in which they see themselves within these worlds (Holland, et al., 1998). As such, individuals can adopt multiple identities as they begin to participate in various worlds (e.g., college) and their responses and positions within these worlds are shaped by the identities acquired. In other words, we believe that the ways in which students are identified by those around them and the ways they personally identify themselves afford them particular positions and deny them others. For instance, students are often positioned in dichotomous ways when it comes to academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998): as good or bad students, successful or unsuccessful, or as prepared or underprepared for college, to name a few.

In our work we highlight Zamel & Spack's (1998) argument that academic literacies are about more than being able to read and write college level texts. Students need to know how to utilize many approaches to knowledge, and interact in classrooms where multiple languages, cultures, and attitudes converge; in other words, they are responsible for navigating a hidden curriculum (Freire, 1972; Jackson, 1990). Additionally, we view academic literacies as the semiotic mediating tools or cultural artifacts used by students to navigate college, a cultural world (Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). These academic literacies function as tools for opening up (or closing) the world of the university to students (Bartlett & Holland, 2002). For students to survive and succeed at the university level, they must learn the ins-and-outs of the university and the multiple discourses that encompass the cultural world of the university—discourses that change from class to class and group to group (Bizzell, 2003; Bartholomae, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; McCarthy, 1987; Rose 1998; Zamel & Spack, 1998).

A Theory of College Readiness

Our theoretical discussions related to persistence at the university would be lacking if we did not reference the research on college readiness. Conley's 2ork (2010, 2005) is particularly influential in the field of college readiness as he has worked to define what it means for a student to be "college ready." He defines college and career readiness as the capability to enroll and succeed in credit bearing courses at a postsecondary institution with the knowledge and skills to then take the next course in sequence, without needing remediation (Conley, 2010). He articulates four interrelated dimensions of college and career readiness that students must possess and employ: 1) key cognitive strategies, 2) key content knowledge, 3) academic behaviors, 4) and contextual and awareness skills (p. 31). Others have a more expansive definition. For example, Garcia (2001) argues that college readiness goes beyond preparing the prospective college student and emphasizes that this readiness must also involve assistance being provided to the student by others. In other words, a more thorough definition of college readiness must include the ways in which other people who have a direct influence on students (e.g., parents) understand and enact these strategies to support their readiness for college.

We believe these definitions of college readiness can be strengthened by a more culturally responsive and nuanced definition of academic literacies, connected to the research on identities (Cary, 2006; Urrieta, 2007). While Conley's (2010) four dimensions are necessary for navigating the university, we also recognize that minority and first generation college students (Pascarella, et al., 2004), and particularly Latina/o students, have culturally specific struggles at predominately White universities (Oseguera, Locks & Vega, 2009; Solorzano, Villalapando, & Oseguera, 2005), even as they are identifying themselves in powerful and personal ways within this new cultural world (Urrieta, 2007). The ways students are positioned, and the responses to such positions, are equally important to these dimensions in understanding the early college experiences of Latina/os (Oseguera, et al., 2009). In fact, it would be naïve to assume that these positionings are always positive and cannot be detrimental to Latina/o students' persistence at the university (Oseguera, et al., 2009; Solórzano, et al., 2005). In other words, we argue that being college-ready is an identity process, fluid and complex, rather only than a list of skills or strategies that students are/are not prepared for.

METHODOLOGY

We chose case study in order to foreground the participants' experiences, independent of large-scale studies or statistics (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Employing case study over other methods of inquiry permitted us to intensively analyze their trajectories over the course of an academic year while also giving them the opportunity to use their own voices to critically reflect on each of their paths taken. Our five participants were chosen because these students were all considered to be college ready when exiting high school, that is, these five participants had participated in detracking initiatives that had given them the skills to succeed at a university and they had had an extraordinarily successful secondary background in a low-performing urban high school. Moreover, these students had been admitted to a prestigious four year college and were labeled first generation college students. Before introducing our participants, we describe both the high school and the university they attended.

Setting and Background

The five study participants attended Roland High School (note: all names are pseudonyms), a large urban high school in the Southwest. The school's demographics were 63% Latina/o, 34% African American, and 2% White; 23% of the student body was labeled Limited English Proficient and 79% were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Concerns about the education students receive in urban schools have been well-documented for many years, with a particular focus on urban-schooled Latina/o and immigrant youth (e.g., Anyon; 1997; Olsen, 1997; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Suarez-Orozco, et al., 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). The faculty (Holly was a teacher there during participants' high school years) were well-versed in this literature and determined to improve the quality of education at Roland. For example, while participants were enrolled, the school was purposively detracked, with open access to all advanced placement courses and a large AVID program. AVID is a national college readiness initiative, known for its success at increasing access for first-generation college students in four year colleges (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, Hampton, 2009). All of our participants were involved in these detracking/transition efforts.

As mentioned above, the five participants had been admitted to a prestigious university, State University (SU), which is located about five miles from the participants' urban high school. Legislation in this state gave students who graduated in the top 10% of their class immediate acceptance to SU and one other flagship campus in the state. Because the SU campus was located in the same home town as these students' urban high school, it was common for students in the top 10% of their high school class to enroll in SU after graduation. This allowed them to maintain their local connections, particularly to their families. Considered one of the biggest universities in the country, SU had an enrollment of 49,697 at the time the study was conducted; 56.6% of the students were identified as White, 15% Latina/o, 14.4% Asian American, 8.9% Foreign, .9% African American, .7% Unknown, and .5% as American Indian. Proponents of the top 10% legislation argue that it helped diversify (both racially and socioeconomically) post-secondary education in an anti-affirmative action climate. Opponents of the legislation argue that many unqualified students, particularly from under-performing urban high schools, are admitted even though they would not meet the standard admission criteria (e.g. SAT scores) (Tienda & Sullivan, 2008). Regardless of the debate, the students in this study were admitted under these circumstances.

Participants

The five students, Manuel, Alex, Aurelio, Monique and Idalia, were in the top 10% at Roland High School and were considered excellent students by their teachers. As seen in Table 1, with the exception of Alex, all are bilingual. Alex and Monique were both born in the United States, but all participants have Mexican heritages. Even though none of the participants were admitted provisionally or under probationary status to SU, the university offers assistance to students from low socioeconomic status to participate in bridge programs to assist in their transition. Even with the top 10% law in effect, the university struggles to retain students with limited financial means and who find the climate of the campus alienating (Niu, Tienda, & Cortes, 2006; Tienda, Alon, & Niu, 2006). These students, based on their demographics, were therefore considered "at-risk" and offered bridge options. Assistance offered included services such as peer tutoring, advising, and study skills classes. Monique was the only participant provided with a peer mentor. Similarly, Aurelio started the school year in a small cohort in computer science, which was meant to help freshmen with the transition to particular majors. These cohorts were available to all enrolled freshmen.

Table 1: Participant Background Information

Participant	Bilingual	Ethnicity	Participation in detracking programs in high school	Where they lived while at SU	Support received at SU
Manuel	Yes	Mexican	AVID; advanced placement	At home	Invited to participate in various programs but declined
Monique	Yes	Mexican/Anglo	Advanced placement	On campus	Mentor assigned
Alex	No	Mexican/African American	AVID; advanced placement	At home	Invited to participate in various programs but declined

| Idalia | Yes | Mexican | Advanced placement | On campus | Invited to participate in various programs but declined |
| Aurelio | Yes | Mexican | AVID; advanced placement | At home | Part of a small cohort of computer science students |

Data Collection

Data were collected throughout the participants' first year and a half at SU. The first year of the study, Holly conducted three focus group interviews, lasting approximately 2-3 hours each, along with individual interviews with each participant 2-3 times a semester. In-depth individual interviews (2-3 hours long), highlighting the first year of their participation at SU, took place during the summer following their freshman year. The interviews were semi-structured, with time left at the end of each one for open-ended responses and concern. Focus group interviews were also semi-structured. Questions involved perceived difficulties and successes associated with their early college experiences. (See Appendix A for sample questions.) Open-ended conversations around were encouraged, and only cut off if there was a serious digression. Participants were encouraged to share about courses, professors, the university climate, and reflect on their post-secondary experiences. In addition, we offered to answer any of their questions about the research itself.

Other data sources included: syllabuses, course assignments, photographic identity journals, professor interviews, classroom observations, text messages, emails, Facebook, MySpace, and our own research journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Merriam & Associates, 2002). However, we focus primarily on focus group interviews in this manuscript because it is the best way to hear from multiple participants and see themes across their experiences.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1984), creating categories as we moved through data, coding interview transcripts, artifacts, and observations. We first coded data separately, looking for common and salient themes, and highlighting particular excerpts we found to be emblematic of these themes. Once we agreed on these, we named the categories. For example, the categories used in the Findings and Analysis section of this paper, "common challenges" and "unique challenges" were first articulated in this process. Next, the categories derived from the previous analyses were also examined using Fairclough's (2003, 1995) levels of discourse in order to ensure a critical stance. We looked for evidence of the three levels of discourse in each passage we highlighted. This analysis ultimately provided a means for looking at power and knowledge in the institution of the university through the societal, local, and institutional discourses that were seemingly evident in participants' conversations.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS, & DISCUSSION

Academic literacies are tools necessary for navigating the university, but they are also mediating devices in identity processes and/or identity construction (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990). Thus, we found that participants' struggles to grasp various academic literacies were particularly important to the ways they positioned themselves and felt positioned at the university. In order to explain findings in more detail, we have divided these academic literacies into two categories. They are: 1) those related to the navigation of coursework, and 2) those related to the navigation of social and cultural capital. We refer to those related to the navigation of coursework as "common challenges" because they are highlighted in most of the literature on transition issues, particularly for first generation college students (Conley, 2010; 2005) and those related to cultural issues as "unique challenges" because they appear to be related specifically to these students' identifications as Latina/os, and to their identity constructions. Both were part of the creation and/or maintenance of a college-going identity, and necessary for successfully identifying with(in) the university.

Experiencing Common Challenges: The Navigation of Coursework

Some of our participants' issues with acquiring the various literacies of the university emerged as common challenges connected to academics. To learn to read and write "appropriately" for various content areas and to succeed in various subjects in various departments across campus require a wide range of skills and discourses (Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Kutz, 1998; Rose, 1998). These are the more predictable struggles—ones that high school faculty, college preparation programs, and university transition programs seek to teach students about (Conley, 2010). These included: conceptualizing time management

skills, learning the ways of TAs and professors, and locating necessary resources, which are discussed below. While these literacies are also often valued at the elementary and secondary level, we highlight them as college or postsecondary literacies within the current definitions of college readiness. When students arrive at the university, their preparedness is often discussed in terms of "college readiness." While students may or may not have learned these literacies or the importance of them at the elementary or secondary level, once they enter a university climate, these literacies are academic literacies associated with post-secondary education (Conley, 2010). At the same time, even though they might be predictable for a majority of students, they are a part of the identity-making process and therefore important to understanding these case studies.

Conceptualizing time management. From the onset of the school year, participants' continually expressed a need to learn time management skills. As seen in the excerpt below, time management was an on-going issue for students.

Idalia: Before I went to college, I thought high school was hard. But once you get to college you realize high school was easy.

Manuel: Yeah. It's more time management. You have a lot of free time. Sometimes I don't feel like studying and I see students reading and studying during the passing periods… and I'm like, "Wow!"

Monique: I thought I would have so much free time and I'd find a job. But now the only reason I don't have a job is because of the work I do at school.

Analysis suggests that learning how to re-conceptualize what they knew about making adequate use of time was an integral part of our participants' identities as college students. Though they had anticipated needing to use their time wisely, such as making time to study and read for their classes, their decision-making related to time was learned through trial and error—in the daily navigation of the university's systems and as they began to see what other college students were doing. Likewise, part of learning how to make use of their time involved getting more from study time as well as making changes to their priorities, such as not looking for "a job" to focus on their studies, as Monique demonstrated. Many students encounter this same difficulty when they enter the university.

However, the discussion above is also deeply nuanced. Manuel talks about "passing periods," a phrase typically used at the secondary level, and he has reappropriated this language for the university. Working with these concepts is a part of the identity-making process. Academic literacies are the tools of identity work. AThese comments remind us that the students are still "trying on" the multiple identities of a college student while borrowing from the concepts they are already familiar with. Students work to reshape their identities in new contexts. At the same time, some of the concepts transfer neatly, like "time management." While students seem to correctly reference concepts like these while developing their college-going identities, others such as the concept of "free time" is a misnomer that tends to be a struggle of new college students. As Idalia stated in the excerpt above, "free time" was something that she had assumed they would have as college students, yet her need to study prevented her from not only having more time for herself but from finding a job. Additionally, part of identifying as a college student typically involves the renewed conceptualization of time management and learning the value of one's newly found free time. Being a successful college student means successfully managing time, thus identifying as a college student is ultimately connected to time management.

Understanding what professors want. Identifying professor expectations were also considered new academic literacies for the participants. Interestingly, such expectations were implicit–they did not learn about these until they saw the grades they received on assignments. However, participants quickly recognized that each professor, class and discipline was unique and required a unique understanding if students' wanted to be successful.

Monique: I guess knowing more people and knowing the professor more and how he or she grades. It got us more comfortable.

Aurelio: Yeah, it got like I got my grade and I'd seen the grade after the first test and you see what you get. And you'll know what you need to study or improve on and what to do for example for studying groups or read more or analyze the chapter more. It's like, I think I based it on like the first test because I failed.

Phrases like, "knowing the professor more" by basing it on a grade or "the first test" is a strategy often employed by new college students. They appear to readily use this strategy in their process of identifying as successful students. In addition to learning from returned assignments and tests, participants attempted to determine what professors and TAs wanted, and thus, better navigate this new world, by communicating directly with them.

Manuel: Also the TAs help a lot. Some of the TAs don't care I don't think though. You go to office hours and they say, "I'm not going to give you the answers." Hey, I'm not asking for answers, I'm asking for help. They always think you are asking for answers.

Monique: I don't like going to TAs; I like going to the professor.

Manuel: Yeah, they know….

Alex: You just do it and learn. You just have to have guts. You get up and do it.

Idalia: That's how you learn. I just needed help, and I knew I needed it now, so I just went.

Communicating with professors and teaching assistants was a hard-learned skill, one that was not only necessary, but required them to get out of their comfort zone if they wanted to succeed in their coursework. Though the participants each had a unique individual approach for dealing with professors, all recognized a need to behave and/or speak in a certain way when dealing with authority figures. This was, however, an academic literacy they acquired as they navigated the university, just as academic reading and writing were (Bizzell, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 1998). They learned to take initiative, "I like going to the professor," and recognized that this required some bravery, "You just have to have guts. You get up and do it." They were navigating these literacies in powerful ways—some more typical, others more suited to their individual personalities. Identity processes are inherently linked to these sorts of choices. They demonstrate participants' agency; this is identity work.

Locating and using resources. Participants quickly learned what resources were and were not available to them at the university.. The participants' conversations revealed that the skills they learned in high school (locating resources) appeared to translate well into university life. Participants even commented that some of their university resources reminded them of AVID and other tutoring services that were available to them at Roland.

Manuel: There are a lot of places [to go for help].

Monique: I go to the undergraduate writing center for writing. For math, I go to my professor.

Manuel: And the J-- Learning Center.

Monique: Oh yeah, I forgot about J--.

Idalia: Tutoring.

Monique: I'm in this program…They tell you if you go to J-- tutoring, that you have twenty five tutoring credits. That's twenty five hours of tutoring a semester. They tell us about study groups and other stuff too…

Participants were able to point to numerous resources offered by the university (i.e, the undergraduate writing center, the J—Learning Center, and tutoring). They also looked to people as resources. They spoke of talking to other students and peer advisors in order to learn the details of the university system. In addition, their close-knit group became a readily available resource. Manuel stated: "Like Professor ------, I'm telling them she's a good teacher. And then I told Idalia, I'm going to take sociology so she's like, 'Oh you should get this professor.' Even between us, we help each other…." Additionally, as seen above, they had become well-versed in the variety of resources available to them. The knowledge of available resources was an easily acquired academic literacy, but the use of resources was still only marginally discussed in focus group conversations. It was not always clear how often resources were being used or how efficiently. We often wonder if the stigma associated with pursuing available resources was not overcome by participants' familiarity with resources; perhaps needing help conflicted directly with participants' desires to identify as successful college students (Analytic memo, 1st semester).

From Common to Unique

These common challenges of university life were generally met with good humor and a willingness to try and succeed. Data suggest that challenges were not difficult for students to identify and some had even been identified prior to entrance at SU. Preparation was possible and resources were available, though not always utilized. The challenges, commonly recognized as "typical" for many students, were recognized as such, but not wholly overcome. This is important on two levels. First, it indicates that the detracking and transition initiatives the students were involved in helped prepare them for the academic issues associated with traditional, straight-forward definitions of college readiness, like those articulated by Conley (2010, 2005). However, it also indicates that this preparation and continued support is not necessarily enough to help Latina/o students persist. Only two of our five participants remained enrolled after their first year at SU. The logical conclusion is that something

"else" must be going on. College readiness must be about more than what students know when they enter the university. This is why we argue that college readiness is *also* about identity processes and the complex negotiations students face at the university.

Therefore, we now present "unique" challenges faced by these urban-schooled Latina/o students. In a year and half of data collection, there were many unique challenges that could be focused on. We have chosen to highlight just a few in this manuscript. While these findings at first may appear to echo the arguments of Oseguera and colleagues (2009) these unique challenges also expand on current research. While current literature suggests that Latina/o students seek solidarity with other Latina/o students (e.g. Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003), we find that these students also chose to highlight commonalities with classmates they had previously discredited. While perhaps not surprising to those who study the first year experiences of Latina/o students, these data need to be considered in the construction of definitions of college and career readiness. While there are other factors that might help demonstrate the complexity of college readiness, for example, financial constraints and living arrangements, we believe all of these factors ultimately are tools in an identity-making process. The university is a cultural world, and identifying within this world is not a choice, though how one identifies is (Holland, et al., 1998). Identity processes in all of their evolutionary complexity, are a part of these students "becoming" college students, rather than already "being" college ready (Urrieta, 2007).

Analyzing Unique Challenges: Highlighting Solidarity

We uncovered certain challenges unique to this group of participants, who also happen to be urban-schooled Latina/os. While our findings may not be transferable to the urban-schooled minority students at large, we believe that the details in these case studies have the potential to challenge our current understandings of college and career readiness. For example, the students in this study pointed increasingly to a need to identify with more privileged students on campus. Data suggest there was a need to find solidarity with students who were first viewed as "too different" to offer support. This solidarity, mentioned mainly in the ideas that a) all college students struggle with academics, and b) all college students are poor, became a necessary factor for survival at SU. For these students, their position at SU often seemed to hinge on how they chose to position others and conversely, how others chose to position them (Holland, et al., 1998; Leander, 2002). They often acted with agency, reconfiguring their identities through (re)positioning themselves in relation to their classmates.

In early interviews, conversations regularly centered on differences among themselves and their classmates at SU. However, a chronological analysis suggested that a continuous focus on difference was difficult for participants to maintain while negotiating college-going identities. They chose at times to temper their portrayals of difference, in particular from White middle class students, with instances of solidarity with these very same students. Students suggested that it was necessary to recognize that the cultural world of the university causes everyone to struggle, even though their struggles may be different. There were classmates who were labeled as "better prepared" because of their social or cultural capital; this was highlighted in great detail, but at times those details were strategically overlooked. We view this as a survival skill, along with their subsequent, frequent mentioning that college students, in spite of being from varying degrees of privilege all enter the university and become "poor students." At first, this seemed an apparent contradiction to all the participants had outlined about difference, but on deeper inspection, this data highlighted the fluid nature of their identities and the constant (re)negotiations they were engaged in as they learned their new cultural world (Holland, et. al, 1998; Urrieta, 2007).

Solidarity: All college students struggle. Participants found certain struggles to be more widespread--meaning common to White middle class students as well as to their own experience. In conversations they often focused on these seemingly universal academic struggles. In a focus group during spring semester, we asked about the difficulties the members of the focus group were having at school. In earlier interviews, the students discussed differences in their academic preparedness and their classmates' preparedness, but now they often talked about their classmates' struggles as well. For instance, when asked if other students struggled too, the following discussion occurred:

[Loud agreement from all]: Yeah, yeah! Everyone!

Holly: What makes y'all know that? How can you tell?

Monique: They tell us.

Manuel: We talk. We hear it.

Alex: You just see it on their faces.

Monique: You see people waking up at six in the morning to study before a test and you ask if they are ready and they're like "No."

In this conversation, there was a global reference to the people around campus ("Yeah, yeah! Everyone!"). Similarities were

reinforced ("You just see it on their faces"). It appeared that, when necessary, they chose to gloss over differences. This was noted in an early analytic memo and reinforced in interviews.

When asked why they sometimes chose to speak about difference and sometimes chose to look for commonalities, they answered:

Idalia: Because everybody doesn't know everything.

Manuel: Because we all go to the same school, same class.

Idalia: Yeah, and we're like if we made it here it must be okay. Then they don't know everything and sometimes they need something so they ask you. And sometimes you need something so you ask them. So you kind of help each other.

Thus, data suggest that students learned the institutional discourse of personal acceptance (i.e, "we all…"). They had earned their place at SU; they had been accepted so they belonged. Participants began placing themselves in the same situations as classmates, adopting the discourse of school as the great equalizer ("if we made it here it must be okay") (Cary, 2006; Fairclough, 1995).

Part of their ongoing identity transformations was a need to find their place at SU. Through connections with classmates, they began to carve out this position; locating themselves in the larger cultural world of SU was an acquired skill. By remembering that they were admitted to SU just like other students were, their positions as college students became firmer. It reminded them of their abilities and strengths, as did other students needing their assistance. Through these discussions, students chose to figuratively situate themselves in close proximity to other students as a means of determining their own positions, not merely accepting their positions in relation to others, which is another act of agency.

Solidarity: All college students are poor. After reading through the first semester's transcripts, students were asked about class issues. When they began talking about it, they erased some of the earlier distinctions, just as they did with earlier distinctions about academic preparedness. Manuel said, "It's not a war of economics because they're like poor too and so it seems like we just hang…we're more connected than other people." This contrasts strongly with students' earlier focus group discussions. In our first focus group, students focused on class differences:

Manuel: Well, you can if there's like girls in class talking about, "Oh, I'm going to my dad's yacht this weekend."

Idalia: Yeah, see that's what--

 [Everyone talking at once].

Aurelio: One of my friends, she invited me over to Puerto Vallarta, because they have like a yacht too. They're like, "Are you going to that party?" I'm like, "Uh."

This suggests that conversations and difference worked to position students in particular ways. "The girls in class" are talking about "yachts" and other foreign concepts. Parties in other countries, a class distinction, left them unable to respond ("I'm like, 'Uh.'"). The cultural world of the university, not immune to positions of power, could have been the last word. However, our participants began to improvise; they chose to look for similarities in spite of glaring difference (Holland, et al, 1998). The excerpt below highlights this.

Monique: The thing I like about here is that everybody's always like in pajamas or sweatpants--

Aurelio: And they don't care.

Idalia: They don't care what you wear here.

Aurelio: I mean like, they're here for a reason and it's to get educated…

Monique: I knew I was going to be running into like more rich people, but I didn't know…Yeah. I knew I wasn't rich.

Idalia: Oh really? I'm like, who cares.

Manuel: Yeah right. I mean we're going to the same school, with the same education.
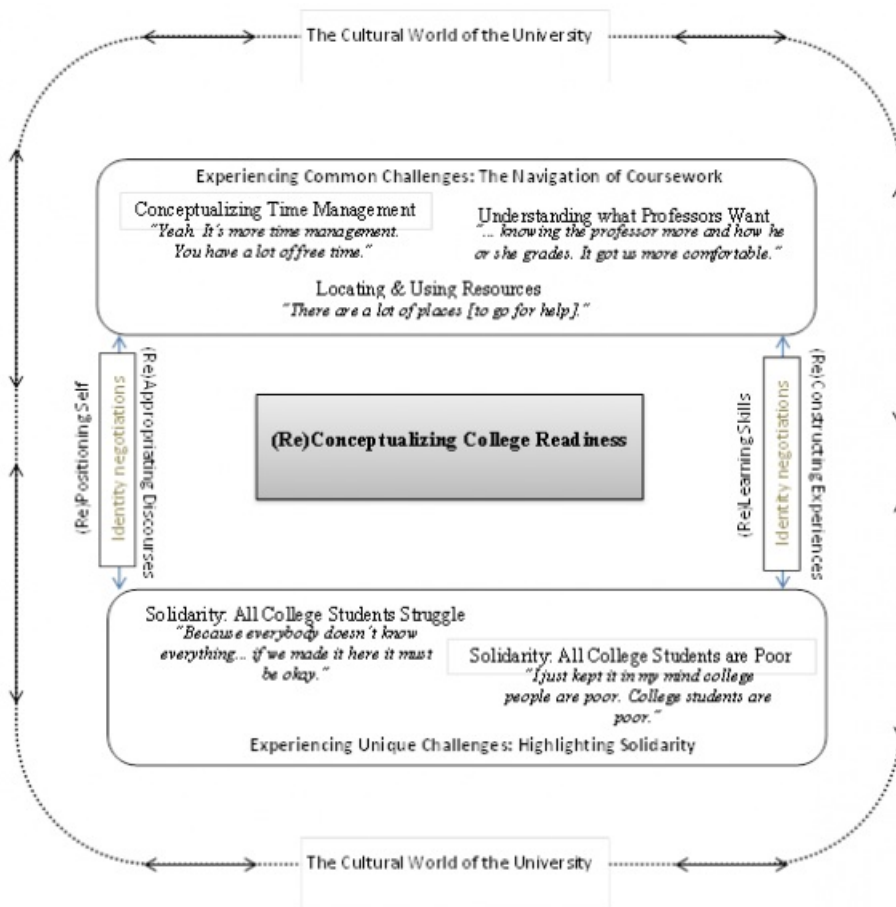
Idalia: Yeah. I'm like what matters is, because I mean maybe their parents might be rich or whatever, but they're not. So they have to gain it themselves. Or maybe they are because probably they have inheritance.

Monique: I just kept in my mind college people are poor. College students are poor. That's what I always kept in my mind.

There was an acknowledgement of class difference, highlighted in local discourse practices, but an institutional discourse of education as the great equalizer (Cary, 2006; Foucault, 1977) was apparent. The "same school" and the "same education" were equated with the same experience. While other students' "parents might be rich," "college students are poor." Solidarity became a necessary part of their college experiences, because it helped them develop their college-going identities ("We're going to the same school, with the same education"). Students improvised by locating these similarities.

Though the differences cannot be adequately developed in this manuscript, it is important to note participants' backgrounds as urban-schooled students were very different from the other students on campus, and their current experiences were very different as well. The solidarity, though a part of their identity processes, was clearly identifiable, but it would take critical scholars (e.g., Solórzano, et al., 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Urrieta, 2007) moments to find many more glaring differences in their experiences. For example, only two of the participants were living on campus. The other three had long commutes and were still completely bound by duties at home. This is common for Latina/o students, and is often cited in the literature on college transitions (e.g., Caballo, 2004). It is important, because while attempting to identify as students these participants also had to remain vital parts of their family lives, and often pointed to this fact as a difficulty that made studying impossible. Manuel said, "They're like, 'Can you babysit?' And I'm like, 'Mom, I have homework.' But she's like, 'But can you babysit?' and I'm like, "BUT I HAVE HOMEWORK!'" This quote reminds us that while these participants were able to identify themselves with more privileged students on campus, the realities of negotiating their identities as Latina/o college students were complicated by a variety of factors, some of which were also cultural like tending to their families' obligations. This reinforces the concept that identity processes and particularly minority students' cultural identities may complicate college readiness.

Figure 1. (Re)Conceptualizing College Readiness

The Cultural World of the University

Experiencing Common Challenges: The Navigation of Coursework

Conceptualizing Time Management
"Yeah. It's more time management. You have a lot of free time."

Understanding what Professors Want
"... knowing the professor more and how he or she grades. It got us more comfortable."

Locating & Using Resources
"There are a lot of places [to go for help]."

(Re)Positioning Self
(Re)Appropriating Discourses
Identity negotiations

(Re)Conceptualizing College Readiness

(Re)Learning Skills
(Re)Constructing Experiences
Identity negotiations

Solidarity: All College Students Struggle
"Because everybody doesn't know everything... if we made it here it must be okay."

Solidarity: All College Students are Poor
"I just kept it in my mind college people are poor. College students are poor."

Experiencing Unique Challenges: Highlighting Solidarity

The Cultural World of the University

IMPLICATIONS: (RE)CONCEPTUALIZING COLLEGE READINESS

Many of the challenges associated with the acquisition of academic literacies at the university level are somewhat predictable. The literature on college readiness is quick to point out what students need in order to be viewed as successful at the university (e.g. Conley, 2010; 2005). As our participants revealed, these skills involved developing time management, locating resources (though they did not always use them), and learning various study skills as they navigated the university. In this sense, the experiences of these Latina/o students validated the existing literature. In fact, data suggest that the knowledge students gained in the detracking initiatives they were involved with at their high schools were not only helpful, but necessary to offer them a general foundation and understanding as they began to identify as college students. Sustained and systematic interventions are particularly important for those students who have had little exposure to a college-going culture (Garcia 2001). We are in no way suggesting these interventions should be halted.

However, our data also indicate that being college-ready encompassed more than simply having a set of academic skills. Participants were negotiating complex identity processes while adjusting to the cultural world of the university. Based on this, we argue that current definitions of college and career readiness are too narrow. While students do need to be able to proceed through college courses without remediation, it is naïve to assume that teaching college readiness skills is enough to ensure this. While exposure to the tenets of college readiness seem necessary as early as possible in these students' schooling, it becomes clear that all encounters with academic literacies are not predictable and not necessarily black and white. As our participants began to navigate college, they negotiated their own identities in the process. They not only had to deal with trying to be successful college students, but also deal with complex identity processes, encased in issues of power and race.

Therefore, we argue that some of the best preparation urban secondary schools can offer, in addition to the basic college readiness skills' preparedness), are the tools for critically tackling discourses of power— providing students with opportunities to practice recognizing these discourses as they exist in the various institutions of their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1997). Students' exposure to critical literacies provides them with opportunities to interrogate societal practices and positions afforded them within institutions (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006). Engaging in this discourse is critical.

At the university, the common struggles associated with the acquisition of academic literacies are often tackled (e.g. lack of knowledge of financial aid or college study skills) in First Year Seminars or bridge programs, but the unique struggles related to identity negotiations, often the result of issues related to race, class, and disconnect are typically not dealt with. Thus, data indicate a need to incorporate identity theory into secondary and university practices and pedagogy, in order to better serve students of color. Investigating the complex identity negotiations of under-represented minority students can provide a foundation for formulating new and successful strategies aimed at retention and completion of a four-year degree. The experiences of these participants at SU demonstrate that college readiness, as we have come to know it, is about more than academic achievement, it is also about complex identity negotiations as students work to "become" college students in the cultural world of the university.

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Have you had difficulties in school so far?
2. What's been a "breeze" for you? What's easy at school?
3. Describe differences between life as a high school student and academic life as a college student.
4. How do you view yourself—when thinking about yourself as a college student?
5. If you were to describe yourself to an outsider, how would you do that? What would you say to make sure they have a complete view of you as a transitioning student?
6. Have you needed help with things so far? If so, where did you go for help? If not, where would you go for help? How was your help received? How do you know your help would be received by the person/place you would go to?
7. Who do you spend time with? Why?
8. How do you structure your time/days?
9. How do you communicate with people both here at home and at school? Has your communication changed? (Think it terms of cell phones, computers, etc.)
10. What are your favorite classes now? Why?
11. Are there any classes you don't like? Any classes that are hard? Explain.
12. How much reading/writing are you doing in your classes right now?
13. Do you feel equipped to deal with the reading/writing load you have?
14. Is most of your reading/writing taking place in English classes or content area classes?
15. What are your teacher expectations for reading/writing?
16. Are you able to meet these expectations without problem?
17. Have you gotten any assignments back yet? What were your teacher comments like?
18. Have you had to ask teachers for help? How'd that go?
19. How's the workload? Overwhelming? Doable? Etc?
20. Do you notice any growth in your reading/writing abilities yet? Are the assignments different from high school? Similar?
21. What do you think about your instructors? How have your interactions been with them so far? Do you speak up in class? Talk to them outside of class?

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