The Anthropology of Educational Persistence: What Can We Learn from Anthropology to Improve Educational Opportunities and Outcomes for Underserved Students?

Teresa McCarty  
*University of California, Los Angeles*, teresa.mccarty@ucla.edu

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy  
*Arizona State University*, fbmb@asu.edu

Amanda Datnow  
*University of California, San Diego*, adatnow@ucsd.edu

Edmund T. Hamann  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, ehamann2@unl.edu

The Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub)
The Anthropology of Educational Persistence

What Can We Learn from Anthropology to Improve Educational Opportunities and Outcomes for Underserved Students?

Prepared by The Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective

Teresa L. McCarty (University of California, Los Angeles), Team Leader
Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Arizona State University)
Amanda Datnow (University of California, San Diego)
Edmund “Ted” Hamann (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)
“...I’ll settle for a bachelor’s but I now want something higher. The more I study, … the more I want.”

— Low-income community college student2

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3
Acknowledgements 3
Our Charge and Guiding Assumptions 4
Organization of the Report 5
5 Key Principles 5
The Demographic Watershed 6
Beyond the Pipeline Metaphor 7
The Non-linear Pathways of Student Persistence 8
The 5 Principles in Practice 10
Conclusions and Next Steps 19
Appendices 22
References and Notes 33
Executive Summary

In the context of a 2010-2011 demographic shift in which more than 50% of the U.S. population now belongs to a group that would formerly have been classified as a “minority,” this report provides evidence from anthropological research on the factors that promote or impede educational persistence, particularly among underserved groups that constitute the “new majority.” Based on an exhaustive review of the literature, we derive five key principles to guide future research, policy, and practice. For each principle, we offer illustrative case examples. This research calls for rethinking the pipeline metaphor commonly used to describe students’ pathway from elementary school to high school to college, and for reconceptualizing notions of “traditional” and “nontraditional” students. Instead, research shows that the pathways are often non-linear and nontraditional, full of twists and turns and stops along the way. Anthropology has much to offer in understanding these dynamic social-educational processes and informing policy and practice designed to ameliorate ongoing educational disparities. A key anthropological insight is that failure is not inevitable for historically underserved groups, and that where we find evidence of success, we must ask why it is not more common and find ways to make success the norm. We conclude by outlining promising avenues for innovative persistence-related research and interventions.

Acknowledgements

We thank ECMC President and CEO Richard Boyle for commissioning this report, and Richard Boyle and ECMC Board Members Gary Cooper and Roberta Cooper Ramo for very valuable, substantive discussions as we worked on our charge. ECMC staff members Dan Fisher, Dave Hawn, and Deb Wohlwend were all extremely helpful in answering questions and facilitating the logistical aspects of our work. Finally, we are grateful to University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate student Elisabeth Reinikort and Arizona State University doctoral candidate Ran Chen for their superb technological and graphics expertise in creating the final report and our original Working Paper, respectively.
Our Charge and Guiding Assumptions

“...[P]ersistence must be examined in its totality, and not just as a metric for college completion.”

— ECMC Foundation, A Strategic Blueprint, 2013, p. 8

In the spring of 2013, ECMC President and CEO Richard Boyle invited Dr. Teresa McCarty of the University of California, Los Angeles to comprise a “thought collective” of leading scholars to compile the best evidence from anthropological research to guide ECMC’s five-year strategic plan. The group’s charge reflected ECMC’s broadened mission to:

[c]onduct a thorough review of all available research, reports, public policies, existing models and other data concerning the primary focus area [educational persistence] to determine specific needs where ECMC Foundation may have the greatest opportunity for impact.

— ECMC Foundation, A Strategic Blueprint, 2013, p. 1

In addition to Teresa McCarty, the Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective includes Dr. Bryan Brayboy of Arizona State University, Dr. Amanda Datnow of the University of California, San Diego, and Dr. Edmund “Ted” Hamann of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. All members of the group are trained in education and the social sciences, with broad interests in the social and cultural context of education and how that context shapes learners’ educational trajectories. Each member has worked with linguistically and culturally diverse K-16 student populations throughout the United States (see Appendix A for brief biosketches).

Anthropologists understand persistence not solely as an individual endeavor requiring personal resilience and the development of a set of dispositions on the part of the student, but also a social and collective process in which students actively engage with educational institutions that may support or discourage their persistence.3 Ideally, schools contribute positively to students’ persistence by enabling them to develop the capacities to choose among multiple life trajectories and educational paths, rather than narrowly constraining their futures. Yet much of what actually happens in school does not point students in this direction.4

Our collective task, then, is to envision educational settings that do not push students out, but instead foster their active engagement and capacity through productive learning environments that understand, cultivate, and build upon students’ assets. Over more than 50 years, anthropologists have documented that this is possible. The task remains in making the possible common and unexceptional. We offer this report as a further step in that direction.
Organization of the Report

This final report follows an ECMC-commissioned Working Paper by our Thought Collective, which was presented to the ECMC Board in July 2013. The final report is gleaned from an exhaustive review of the anthropological literature on educational persistence. Based on that review, we derive five key principles, introduced in the section that follows and developed more fully in the body of the report. For each principle, we offer an illustrative case example. We stress, however, that each case in some way addresses all five principles, and that the anthropology of educational persistence teaches us that successful interventions employ all five principles in concert.

As background to the five principles, we discuss the recent demographic “watershed” in the U.S. and its implications for educational persistence among diverse groups of learners. Anthropology has much to offer in both understanding these dynamic social processes and informing policy and practice designed to ameliorate ongoing educational disparities.

We then suggest a rethinking of the pipeline metaphor commonly used to describe students’ pathway from elementary school to high school to college. Instead, research shows that the pathway is often crooked, full of twists and turns and stops along the way. Research also shows the fallacy of common notions of “traditional” and “nontraditional” students. As we discuss, “nontraditional” students now constitute a majority of college enrollments.

We conclude by outlining promising avenues for persistence-related research and interventions. In the appendices, we provide additional case examples of promising practices, programs, and research findings. References appear at the end of the report.

5 Key Principles — All Are Important

As anthropologists of education (and as citizens), we believe that all young people should receive an education that prepares them to participate fully and critically in a democratic society, and that affords a pathway to college, irrespective of whether a given student decides to pursue that pathway. What educational persistence implies is the ability to choose one’s life course. Each of the principles below, derived from extensive research, illuminates what anthropologists have learned about making persistence and the ability to choose the norm.

1. **Failure is not inevitable for underserved students.** Students from underserved groups can—and do—succeed; if this success is possible, then we must ask why is it not more common and look for ways to make success more frequent.

2. **Structure matters.** Research clearly shows that economic station at birth is predictive of station in adulthood, with those born poor more likely to remain so and those born wealthy more likely to remain among the upper social class. The task is not to wish away this reality; rather it is to document it and consider how structure both constrains
and enables individuals and groups, and what circumstances can enable its circumven-
tion or transformation.

3. **Context matters.** Context is important not only in understanding the fine-grained details of students’ interactions within the school environment, but also in determining the extent to which education models developed at one site can be successfully transported or “scaled up” to other settings. Just as palm trees can thrive in desert oases but not in the tundra, ideas that are viable and wise in one setting may struggle, absent adaptation, in another.

4. **Replication is nuanced.** If good ideas and successful practices could be copied wholesale and successfully imitated unreflectively in new settings, we would do this routinely. However, replication is more complicated; those seeking to emulate what has worked elsewhere need to understand the first environment and why a strategy worked there and understand their own environment to see how the initial idea needs to be honed or changed to work in a new environment.

5. **Positive change takes time.** Different outcomes require different practices; different practices require different understandings of what is possible and desirable; different understandings come from learning, trying, adapting, and reconciling. None of this occurs quickly and all of these processes inevitably include detours, dead ends, and new starts.

To place the five principles in context, we turn now to a consideration of the rapidly changing demographics in the U.S., and what this means for persistence, the educational pipeline, and the changing profile of today’s college students.

**The Demographic Watershed — As Diversity Has Increased, So Have Educational Disparities**

Between July 2010 and July 2011, among the approximately 4 million children born in the U.S., 50.4% belonged to a group that would have been classified prior to this time as a “minority,” with minority referencing not just numerical status, but also social and economic marginalization. Passing the 50% threshold culminated a decades-long demographic transformation that began with the “Baby Bust” (the end of the Baby Boom in 1964) and concurrent changes in U.S. immigration law that reduced prior pro-European admission preferences.

In the May 17, 2012 *Wall Street Journal*, William Frey, a demographer for the Brookings Institution, noted that the change in birth patterns constitutes a “major turning point” for American society: "We’re moving from a largely white and black population to one which is much more diverse and is a big contrast from what most baby boomers grew up with." Thus, “minority” may still be a descriptor of cultural capital and social exclusion, but it becomes more and more hazardous. It is not healthy for a country to have more than half of its population characterized by identity at birth as disadvantaged. Framing this a different way, the persistence in higher education of students from groups that have historically been under-represented becomes more important as members of such groups become proportionally and numerically an ever
larger part of the age-eligible population for higher education. This report arrives at a time when the historic problem of unequal access to and support in higher education is becoming both more acute and consequential.

We see these consequences in the statistics on educational persistence by diverse groups of learners. For example, less than 1 in 2 Latino students will complete high school, and only 8% will complete a college degree. A little more than half of American Indian students will graduate from high school, and only 2% will complete a college degree. In contrast, 84% of White middle-class students will complete high school and one-quarter will graduate from college (see Figure 1). Rates of high school graduation and completion are also far lower for low-income students than their middle- and high-income counterparts.

Our point is not to lament the relative success of any group, but instead to highlight that for too many members of too many groups success is impeded. Research shows that this is not inevitable and it also illuminates how patterns of stratification can be disrupted (see the appended case studies).

In qualitative studies of these trends, the voices of students and those who have dropped out of school reveal concerns about their ability to persist and often a critique of educational systems they feel are doing them a disservice. Many low-income youth and youth of color feel “pushed out” or “pushed through” the system, believing that preparation for college was not a priority in their K-12 education, even if they made it to graduation. They feel that teachers did not hold them to high standards, or that their schools did not provide rigorous curricula. This leaves many students with profound learning gaps that can take years to address through remedial college coursework. As one student in the recent Pathways to Postsecondary Success report lamented, “[I]t hit my self-esteem a lot.” Thus, even when these students persist into college, they often feel they are underprepared for high levels of achievement.

Beyond the Pipeline Metaphor

The metaphor of a pipeline is often invoked to describe students’ progression from primary to secondary school and then on to higher education. The same metaphor is invoked to describe and critique a second progression, the school-to-prison pipeline. In that instance the concern is with structures and practices that, instead of pointing to higher education, divert youngsters to incarceration and the limited life opportunities and social challenges that entails. Anthropologists have long been concerned with both pipelines. The metaphor is useful because it allows us to ponder where the pipeline leaks (e.g., the transition from middle school to high
school) and who or which groups “leak” more often, as well as to delineate the expected or desired pathway.

Yet ultimately the pipeline metaphor can be more restricting than illuminating. Pipelines are also used to tap finite resources, and there is risk in imagining children as a resource that can dry up or go away. The metaphor also implies that the infrastructure that does or does not help a student is pre-existing, created in advance of the passage through the pipeline, rather than co-created by sentient beings—teachers, students, administrators, specialists, and parents—who try to make sense of the educational world and their roles in it.

And finally, the notion of an educational pipeline directs attention too easily to the desired route or path and away from the premise that different students make it to higher education through different strategies and with different supports. In other words, there is not one pipeline but many paths — a topic to which we now turn.

The Non-linear Pathways of Student Persistence

Efforts to improve student persistence have often been designed with a “traditional” student in mind. This student prepares for college during high school, attends a 4-year university upon graduation at the age of 18, lives in residence, attends only one university, and graduates in the normative time of four years. This is an outdated notion of the typical college student today.¹²

Increasingly, postsecondary students in the United States are not coming to college out of high school, they are not attending full-time, and they are absolutely not 18 or 19.... The number of single parents among undergraduates has nearly doubled in the last 20 years, and since 1970, the number of undergraduates over 40 has nearly doubled.¹³

But if “non traditional” is an outdated term it remains worthwhile to note its potency. It steers us away from thinking of older students, students of color, and students with their own families as “normal” and thereby designing higher education with them in mind.¹⁴ Forty-five percent of college students are older, attend school part-time and work full time, or are parents.¹⁵ Students now preparing for and attending college are a diverse group with a wide range of experiences. Paying attention to the similarities and differences in this student population can help us better plan initiatives that support their persistence.¹⁶

Research shows that students’ routes to and through college are also more varied than in the past.¹⁷ Many college students, particularly low-income, first-generation students, do not take a linear path to college entry or completion. This is due to both personal and college-related factors. Low-income students often have to juggle child-care, work, and transportation issues while attending college.¹⁸ These complicated logistics can lead to students dropping out or increasing their time to graduation, as they often can only enroll part-time. In his book, Back to School, Mike Rose describes the growing population of “second-chancers” — people in difficult circumstances who reinvent themselves after having a second (or third or fourth) chance at their education.¹⁹
In another version of the non-linear pathway, students with cultural and family ties who seek to remain in their communities often have to piece together courses in order to stay connected while in school. Consider the following quote from a Native American student in New Mexico:

*I am slowly piecing together my master’s degree as I work two jobs. I am a single mother of two daughters so this semester I am taking one of my classes at UNM-Gallup which is not too far from our home, I drive two and a half hours to Albuquerque for a Wednesday evening class on main campus, and I’m also taking an online course. I don’t know what I would do without my Mom, my grandparents, and my cousins who care for my children when I work and take classes. I can’t give up on this degree because it means a better life for my girls and a more meaningful way to serve my people.*

— Dine’ (Navajo) college student.20

Because of their circumstances, low-income, culturally and racially diverse students often take a non-linear path towards college completion.21 Many attend more than one institution, attend community college before a 4-year university, and/or take time off from school.22 However, college factors also contribute to students’ non-linear pathways to college completion (or to dropping out). For example, students in community colleges sometimes find that the pathways to transfer are unstructured or uncoordinated, especially if they begin in certificate programs. A substantial number of students are also required to take basic skills or developmental education coursework before they can begin college-level coursework. For some community college students, getting through remedial courses can take two years.23 In lieu of a linear pathway to college completion, the pathway for a first-generation, low-income, and/or non-traditional student in community college often has twists, turns, and detours, as Figure 2 depicts.

*Figure 2. The pathways through college are often non-linear. (Source: D. Solórzano, A. Datnow, V. Park, & T. Watford, Pathways to Postsecondary Success, 2013, p. 41. Reprinted with permission.)*
The 5 Principles in Practice

Whether at the scale of classroom interaction — the credible teacher, leading substantive inquiry with the engaged and interested student — or at the level of the school, the school system, or scales even larger, anthropologists examine educational persistence as a co-created sociocultural process. Schooling can be affirming but it can equally be alienating. It can work for or against the interests of a given child or group of children. The power of anthropology lies in its thick description, gleaned from sustained, first-hand ethnographic investigation, of what goes right or wrong along the multiple pathways in students’ educational trajectories. Ethnographic inquiry also illuminates how scales intertwine, how the classroom relates to the grade level, the grade level to the school, the school to the school district, and schools to larger systems of policy, governance, and resource stratification.

In an effort to convey the power of ethnographic inquiry into educational persistence, we illuminate each of our five principles with specific anthropological studies. The referenced studies are important, but behind each case are dozens of other studies that could be cited to illustrate the same points. The principles are applicable for all students, but especially for underserved students whose persistence rates are of great concern.

**Principle No. 1: Failure is not inevitable for underserved students.**

In documenting and questioning educational failure, anthropologists insist that failure is a social production, not inevitable, but instead a tragic combination of limited expectations, limited opportunities, and diminished resilience. More optimistically, anthropologists also have documented dynamic educational environments in which students of color, low-income students, and students who are members of other groups who often fare poorly instead succeed.

For many researchers and policy makers, the framing of underserved students in under-resourced schools suggests that failure is either inevitable or that some failure should be expected. Ethnographic research clearly shows that with the proper structures, guidance, motivations, and context, failure is not inevitable and that indeed, success — defined as persistence, completion, and furthered engagement in education or the work place —is not only possible but probable. This is true for a range of students and types of students, but for purposes of illustration, we first focus on American Indian education, a domain with well-documented challenges.

**Case Example 1: A Successful University Program for Native American Students**

Bryan Brayboy and his colleagues found that Native American students who were focused on serving their communities, tribal nations, and others were much more likely to complete their undergraduate and graduate studies than those who focused solely on individual achievement and material gain. Their work was clear to note that these highly successful Indigenous students did not see their progress as individual success; rather, the primary motivation for working through challenges and barriers was the idea that students could and would serve others. Yet individual successes and serving others are not mutually exclusive.
Examples of programs that demonstrate these successes include American Indian teacher preparation programs and doctoral cohort programs.28

Teacher preparation programs for Indigenous students serve cohorts of American Indian students who want to be teachers and are guided by the idea of “self-determination through self-education.”29 The programs assist tribal nations in determining successful educational outcomes of their children by having teachers from communities serve as their educational guides. In order to do this, many universities have formed partnerships with tribal nations to create programs that culminate with either a bachelor’s or master’s degree and teaching licensure/certification. These programs emphasize building local capacity. Oftentimes the solutions to problems underserved communities face are located within that same community.

There are a few unique aspects of these programs. First, the individuals who enter the program sign a payback agreement binding them to serve her/his tribal nation for the same number of years that they receive funding. These programs run between $45,000-$80,000 per participant, making the commitment significant. Second, the program puts into place administrative and advisory oversight between the student and the program. A Project Director oversees the day-to-day needs of the program and individual students, both academically and socially. This person is an advocate for the student, interfacing with university faculty, programs, and policies, and someone who provides candid assessments to program participants. Sometimes this feedback is given in a “you can, and must, do better” way; other times, it is about listening and assisting students in meeting the rigors and demands of the program. Most importantly (and evoking Figure 1 from p. 7 of this report), it is feedback that attends to the meaning-making engaged by individual participants and in relation to the groups and structures of which they are part.

Additionally, such programs create structures that undergird academic success. Extensive research on American Indian/Alaska Native and other underserved students shows that barriers to success include cultural incongruities and lack of finances, role models, and academic preparation.30 The Project Director works closely with students to address these needs. Not only does the program provide funding and living expenses for students, it also creates relationships between a banking institution and the student, helping students to be able to “know” the person with whom they bank. The university forms a relationship with bank officers and tellers so that there is a “familiar face” at the bank with whom to work. The bank creates accounts and systems that allow students to be financially successful. The programs have courses on “financial literacy” not just for the enrollees (most of whom are “non-traditional” older students) but also for the enrollees’ adolescent children as well.

The program hires writing and math tutors to assist students so that they receive individualized instruction to address academic issues if they emerge. Further, the program seeks to address social needs by connecting students with each other, local community members, and other Native students, staff, and faculty on campus. Finally, the program establishes a culture of recognizing that participants are serving their communities and that the work in which they are engaged is transformative. The tribal nations that the students will serve are included in these efforts.

These programs have successfully operated for more than a decade in Alaska, Arizona, Utah and other states. Students have a 95 percent retention rate (compared to 19 percent for Native American students in institutions of higher education) and 90 percent of the teachers continue to work in schools serving Native children. The other 10 percent are either principals in doctoral programs, or full-time parents.
Programs such as these, which are tailored to the needs, strengths, and sociocultural contexts of particular student groups, demonstrate that success and persistence are the measure against which programs should be evaluated, and that success rather than failure is inevitable when thoughtful, responsive programs are put into place. Although improving persistence is challenging, there is ample evidence that with the proper supports, more students can be successful in enrolling in and graduating from college.

**Principle No. 2: Structure matters.**

As Case Example 1 shows, structure is a crucial factor in shaping students’ experiences in institutions of higher education. Structure includes the rules and resources that guide institutions, including policies and their enforcement, curriculum, course schedules, and the use of exams as academic measures of readiness or success. Structures can be both enabling and disabling.\(^{31}\) Extensive ethnographic research shows that the history of education for African Americans\(^ {32}\) American Indians,\(^ {33}\) Asian Americans,\(^ {34}\) Latinas/os,\(^ {35}\) immigrants from Africa and the Baltics,\(^ {36}\) and poor Whites\(^ {37}\) is filled with structures that serve as barriers to educational success. But there are also examples of the ways that these groups have engaged institutional structures to make them enabling.\(^ {38}\) In these instances, structures—which are often invisible or hidden—are made visible, transparent, and enabling.

Our point is that the notion that individuals simply need to work harder or smarter, and pull themselves up by their bootstraps fails to recognize the power of knowing rules, having strategies and assistance in negotiating the rules and accessing resources. Support programs that make the rules and strategies for academic success transparent to students and provide resources have proven invaluable in enabling students to persist. We describe some examples below.

**Case Example 2: Community College Support Programs**

Colleges offer a range of programs that provide students with a host of supports, including advising, tutoring, priority registration, and social networking opportunities.\(^ {39}\) For example, all 112 community colleges in California offer the publicly funded Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), designed to support students who face educational and socioeconomic barriers to academic success. Students receive priority registration, vouchers to pay for books, and greater access to counseling, which students find particularly helpful.\(^ {40}\) In studies of these programs, students explained that the EOPS counselors made information meaningful and relevant, in contrast to other frustrating counseling encounters they had.

Another promising intervention is an Academic Learning Community Program in a California community college that links courses so that students move through as cohort.\(^ {41}\) This allows them to develop peer support networks and participate in study groups. Instructors collaborate to monitor students' progress and coordinate lessons, enhancing students' persistence and academic development. A student explained:

> All the professors…work together so it makes it easier. They know what’s going on in your reading class and your English class, and those professors, they communicate with each other. It gives the
Students in the Academic Learning Program felt positively about the quality of teaching, which may be due to the fact that instructors were purposefully selected for the program and believed in its mission. At a Los Angeles community college, the First Year Experience (FYE) program offers intensive support services to students in their first year. FYE also provides priority enrollment and specialized guidance courses for students to develop the skills for college success. The FYE program provides a “one-stop shop” for students to receive advising and connect with campus resources. One student who participated in the FYE program found it so fundamental to her persistence in college that she said without it, “I would still have been home trying to figure out what I want to do, and probably taking the wrong classes, and pretty much wasting my time. So I got lucky that the [program] helped us…”

Making course expectations explicit aids all students, but particularly first-generation college students who may not possess the tacit knowledge of college. As a first-generation student explained, “I had no clue what the syllabus was or the importance of the syllabus”. These students expressed not understanding the purpose of office hours, how to approach professors with questions, or how to gain clarity about course expectations, when they first began college. Professors across the university or college can help expose these hidden rules of college success; however, it is more typical for students to have these experiences when they are part of programs with a focused mission.

The positive experiences students have in support programs “highlight how persistence is not only an individual endeavor but also a social and collective process.” Such programs can provide resources, supports, and instruction on the hidden rules of college success that students need in order to persist. Although these programs can be very beneficial for student persistence, participation is limited to a relatively small number of students. Entry criteria, such as full-time enrollment or placement test scores, prohibit large numbers of students from taking advantage of them. Unfortunately, most students are not aware such support programs exist – highlighting again the imperative to make institutional structures transparent.

**Principle No. 3: Context matters.**

Lessons from decades of research and practice underscore that context matters for educational change and improvement. This notion of context has several dimensions. On a practical level, the context is comprised of the people, policies, practices, and patterns of interaction within a place or setting. These dimensions of context – and the interrelationships between them – are critical for our understanding of student persistence. For example, from the late 1990s to today, federal and state government policies have focused on a one-size-fits-all approach to engaging learners. As a result, the achievement gap, which has been made problematic by a number of scholars, has actually widened for African American, American Indian, and Hispanic learners. It is evident that many schools and schooling policies are not, in fact, meeting the needs of underserved and under-resourced learners and communities.
At its core, education and the process of schooling are relational and rooted in the local context. People vary, places vary, and the ways in which people interact with policies and interventions also vary. There may be some common patterns in how educational reform efforts unfold, but it has been well documented that aspects of the local setting are critical and are intertwined with action at every moment.49

Context by definition includes notions of culture, including the culture students bring with them to school as well as the culture of the institution. Sometimes these cultures are compatible; other times they are less so. In a classic illustration of what ethnography can teach us about context, culture, and educational persistence, Glynda Hall and her associates described a mismatch in conversational norms between June (the teacher) and Maria (a previously eager student) in a remedial college classroom.50 June’s unwitting adherence to a traditional instructional model in which the teacher initiates, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates clashed with the conversational norms in

Maria’s cultural community, which emphasized more open-ended responses. In a way that highlights the elusive invisibility of culture, neither June nor Maria could explain why their teacher-student relationship was not succeeding. Unfortunately, that failure was much more consequential for Maria, who dropped out with a new skepticism about her talents, than for June, who explained Maria’s struggles as Maria’s problem rather than as mutually constructed.

As we consider the myriad ways in which context plays a role in student persistence, we turn our attention to an investigation of classroom conditions and how they interact with students’ culture, background, and learning experiences.

**Case Example 3: Classroom Contextual Conditions**

College campuses with limited diversity often do not provide hospitable learning conditions for low-income, culturally and racially diverse students who are underrepresented in college.51 Even on campuses where the student body is more diverse, college teaching tends not to reflect the cultural backgrounds of the students. Faculty design their coursework with their own cultural frame in mind, and most faculty are of European American descent.52 Students from Native American, Hispanic, African American or other heritages often do not find their cultures represented, either in the course content or in the pedagogy.53 Faculty are sometimes unaware that their courses and teaching methods reflect the dominant culture and thus pose challenges for students from minority backgrounds.

Due to these cultural differences, classroom conditions may present barriers to persistence for underserved students. Some racial minority students report feeling “hypervisible” to faculty and students and being
called upon to address any questions relating to their race or culture, whereas others feel invisible. Anthropological research has also revealed the racism that racially diverse students experience from their peers in the classroom. In a study of African-American students attending a predominantly White university, the students reported that they felt like a “fly in the buttermilk” and that they had to prove themselves in classroom interactions with their White peers. One student remarked, “…because I was Black, they didn’t think I knew what I was doing.”  African-American students also reported that White students were reluctant to share class notes with them, and they felt isolated from their peers. In the rare class taught by a Black professor, the dynamics were different, however, in part because those classes also attracted more Black students. As a student explained, “I felt at home in those classes. I felt like I learned more because I didn’t have to spend time fighting somebody… and saying quit looking at me or having to pick my words very carefully…”

In a qualitative study of low-income community college students, students reported that when they encountered instructors who related content to their lives and interests, they became more engaged and likely to persist. A student explained: “I hated reading. Now I like reading because of my English teachers. Well, this class especially… she has a broad theme: social justice. … She composed this book of different readings on justice and racism, and that’s interesting to me, so now I like reading.”

These findings support those in Case Example 1, showing that success and persistence for many underserved students is directly related to their perception that they can use their education for the collective good – to move their communities forward – rather than solely for individual achievement. A student in the study cited above explained: “If there are connections to my people, my culture—this knowledge is important because then it is likely to be helpful to my people.”

As another example, Adrian Huerta, Patricia McDonough, and Walter Allen analyzed qualitative data collected in the CHOICES project, which studied the influence of educational environments on the college aspirations and decision-making of students of color in 10 Los Angeles schools. Focusing on young men in the study, Huerta et al. found that their motivation to attend college derived from a desire to provide resources for their family, serve as a role model, and demonstrate “internal strength” to overcome challenges (see Appendix E for a fuller discussion).

In short, family and cultural connections are a motivating factor for the college-going process and persistence of culturally and racially diverse students. Thus, it is critical that the classroom context provide opportunities for them to make connections to their roots.

Case examples such as these also show that positive relationships between students and faculty contribute significantly to persistence. Creating proactive, structured opportunities for culturally diverse students to build relationships with faculty early on in their college experience can increase retention.

Colleges and universities can have a significant impact on high-risk students’ success and persistence through creating opportunities for students to experience at least one quality relationship with a staff or faculty member. But ultimately, an institution must have people who are willing and encouraged to do so.
These findings from qualitative research at the college level are also robust in research at the K-12 level. A large body of ethnographic research supports culturally responsive instruction wherein students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge is integrated into course content in meaningful ways, and in which diversity is seen as an asset to built upon, rather than a deficit. For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings examined the ways that successful teachers of African American children integrate aspects of children’s lives into day-to-day teaching practices. Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti showed how teachers can use ethnography to tap the household “funds of knowledge” of their Mexican American students, bringing that knowledge directly into the classroom, with impressive academic results. Castagno and Brayboy, Lipka and his associates, McCarty and Dick, and Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp have documented the benefits of similar approaches for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. Of course, asset-based approaches are characteristic of good teaching in general, but research shows convincingly that culturally congruent curriculum and instruction make a significant positive difference for underserved students. (See Appendix H for seminal anthropological studies of culture and context in and out of the classroom setting.)

**Principle No. 4: Replication is nuanced.**

Because context matters in educational persistence, replicating or scaling up “what works” in one setting can be a daunting enterprise when the contextual conditions change. Every site has a unique context and practices that work well in one location may not work well in another. For example, consider a curriculum that utilizes the local context of Alaska to teach math through the harvesting of salmon of wild blueberries. In the process, students learn how to engage fractions, measuring, the empirical study of the elements and natural resources around them, and how to engage critical thinking processes of relevance. If a math teacher in southeastern North Carolina were to attempt to replicate the lesson, it would be a failed effort from the start. There are neither salmon nor blueberries in southeastern North Carolina. There are, however, bass, tobacco and wild blackberries. In this way, the principles of the lesson may transfer—that is, taking into account the local context and factors relevant to learning fraction, measuring, and empirical study—without the details of the lessons or curriculum themselves. Similarly, the idea of a test that measures knowledge of a picket fence in the northwestern Plains states will create confusion where students are aware of post and wire fences.

The simple point here is that ways of measuring knowledge or engaging in the teaching or learning process are not subject to replication in a wholesale or universal way. As the educational anthropologist Hugh Mehan noted, “There are no carbon copies in school improvement.”

The notion of adapting design principles to new circumstances is a more productive way of thinking about the process of moving successes to scale, as even when we replicate, our experiences and the ways in which different people engage with them are not the same. Thus, moving design principles to scale is a co-constructed process, whereby the actions of multiple people at different levels of a system all play a key role. Success or failure is a joint accomplishment by people at these different levels.
Moreover, moving good ideas to scale is also a problem of social learning and cognitive capacity. People’s prior knowledge of and experiences with reform mediate how they respond to new initiatives. As people attempt to replicate programs aimed at improving student persistence, they engage in a sense-making process, both individually and collectively. Moreover, we know from studies of school change that people in positions of power often have more opportunities to shape what is valued or privileged and what is discounted or suppressed. Hence, to understand how people interact within an educational setting, we also need to understand the role of power. We draw upon this research as we consider a case of effort to replicate some promising programs.

**Case Example 4: Nuanced Efforts at Replication**

The example of the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) “untracking” program shows how anthropologically informed accounts illuminate the dynamic implementation process in which contextual features are paramount. In a 3-year qualitative study involving extensive interviews and observations, Lea Hubbard and Hugh Mehan documented the ways in which context reshapes the implementation of the AVID program when it moves to scale. A key component of the model is tutoring of high school students by college students. Rural schools, however, did not have access to college students and had to make adjustments. AVID also requires that students be “untracked” and placed in honors and advanced placement courses. In some schools, this practice ran counter to teachers’ attitudes that these students would not be successful in higher-level classes, leading to significant struggle on the part of those promoting AVID as well as adaptations to the model.

As this example indicates, successfully implementing educational innovations requires attending carefully to the local context, so that the structural, cultural, and political dimensions of educational change – and persistence – are addressed.

**Principle No. 5: Positive change of an institutional environment takes time.**

In a world where it is easy to acquire things quickly, enacting positive change and engaging in transformational practice takes time. We learn from anthropology that change, like persistence, is a whole-system process. Thus, our actions must be multi-pronged, emanating from both the bottom up and the top down and mindful of multiple targets at the same time. Early childhood education is critical, as are teacher preparation and graduate school programs and all phases of the educational process in between. Implementing change that is durable requires that we adopt a long-term, system-wide view, remembering that the particulars of a given educational intervention are not isolated from the larger sociocultural, economic, and political context in which they are implemented.

**Case Example 5: Puente de Hózhó Trilingual Magnet School**

In Flagstaff, Arizona, a city of 65,000 with a significant number of Hispanic and Native American residents, a trilingual public magnet school, Puente de Hózhó, serves students in grades K through 5. The concept for the school, which began in 2001, originated in 1998 at another school in the Flagstaff Unified School District, where an innovative Navajo bilingual education program had been so successful that program...
evaluations showed it actually accelerated student learning. But the origins of Puente de Hózhó – literally “Bridge of Beauty” in Spanish and Navajo – are traceable to even earlier bilingual education efforts begun in 1983 by Māori educators in New Zealand and Hawaiian educators in Hawai‘i.

A major motivation for starting Puente de Hózhó, according to school founder Michael Fillerup, “was to improve the academic success of language minority students” in the school district. “Specifically,” Fillerup adds, “we wanted to eliminate an academic achievement gap that has separated our language majority students from our language minority students for decades.” To do this the school offers both a Spanish-English bilingual program and a Navajo-language immersion program. In this way, says Fillerup, a school was created “where language minority children [are] viewed not as ‘problems to be solved’ but as the heart and soul of the learning environment; where their diverse languages and cultures would be regarded as assets rather than deficits.”

Puente de Hózhó differs in substantial ways from the district’s previous Navajo bilingual program, and from the Māori and Hawaiian programs that provided even earlier models (replication is nuanced and context matters). It has also taken more than a decade to evolve into the success story it is today (change takes time). In a two-year (2009-2011) ethnographic study of the program – part of a larger national study of promising practices in American Indian and Alaska Native education – McCarty and Brayboy found that a key “promising practice” at Puente de Hózhó was a transformative school culture that emphasizes high academic expectations and a content-rich curriculum, while also tangibly demonstrating the value of all students’ heritage languages and cultures as resources for learning.

How well have students performed at Puente de Hózhó School? With the exception of one year early in the program, students have consistently met or exceeded state and federal benchmarks measured by standardized tests. Recently, the school has ranked among the top four schools in the district, surpassing schools serving more affluent students from dominant language and culture backgrounds. Importantly – and demonstrating again that positive change takes time – Puente de Hózhó students who performed the best as fifth graders were those with the longest experience in the program – those who began in kindergarten.

Equally important, Puente de Hózhó promotes educational persistence. In follow-up interviews with graduates, McCarty found that many went on to Puente de Hózhó academies at the middle and high school levels. When asked how their prior education had prepared them for secondary school, one student noted, “I learned to keep trying, not to stop…keep pushing yourself….Always try your hardest and don’t stop believing!” Another student stated, “Keep trying, never give up, and don’t be embarrassed about your own language and culture.”

The Puente de Hózhó case shows that change takes time, both at the individual level – the highest performing students are those with the longest experience in the program – and at the school district and policy levels. This case also illuminates the power of all five principles when they are joined in practice. Structure matters – Puente de Hózhó’s transformative school structure enables it to offer a unique multilingual, multicultural educational experience to diverse learners; context matters – the school builds on each students’ linguistic and cultural strengths; and replication is nuanced – the Māori and Hawaiian models were strategically adapted to serve urban students in the U.S. Southwest. Perhaps most importantly, failure is not inevitable
for underserved students – Puente de Hózhó students are expected to persist and succeed, and they are fulfilling that expectation.

**Conclusions and Next Steps — What Anthropological Research Suggests for ECMC’s Action Plan**

In the process of the research undertaken for this report, we have come to appreciate anew the unique and powerful lens into educational persistence that anthropology offers. By examining persistence “up close,” in depth, and over extended periods of time, anthropological inquiry helps us tease out educational practices that benefit all learners and those that are especially beneficial for underserved students. Anthropology also shows that just as there are many pathways to college completion, so too are there many ways of understanding and measuring “success” beyond the metrics of individual advancement and the scores on standardized tests.

The five principles undergird all of this work. Yet, while we know a great deal about the principles and their implications for education opportunities and outcomes, there is still much that we do not know. In keeping with our first principle – failure is not inevitable – we conclude our report with four areas ripe for new inquiry, focusing on what we can learn from successful models and the promise for young people such approaches hold.

1. **We need a better understanding of students’ non-linear and non-traditional pathways.** Research is needed to determine how we can better support students along various portions of this trajectory. This would involve identifying the salient variables and their interplay in promising examples of some successful students’ “non-traditional” pathways. (See Appendix C for a major recent study of multiple pathways to postsecondary success.)

2. **We need to know much more about student transitions and persistence across varied educational settings.** What factors promote successful transitions – for example, from middle school to high school or community college to a 4-year institution – under what conditions, and over time? How do these factors interact with students’ social, linguistic, and cultural “capital” to influence persistence in school? Does longitudinal inquiry reveal how factors at different points in students’ trajectories combine to make success/resilience more or less likely?

3. **We need to better understand the everyday, on-the-ground experiences and worldviews of the youth whom educational interventions target.** Recent anthropological research has shown the complex ways that young people participate in a dynamic, interconnected world, crossing multiple cultural, social class, and linguistic borders as they negotiate the demands of their families, peer groups, popular culture, and global youth media. This research moves beyond adult-determined developmental expectations and definitions of success toward a serious engagement with youth as interpreters and shapers of society. Listening to youth voices is a major contribution of anthropology,
but much more needs to be done if we are to understand how and why some youth persist, often against great odds, and how this persistence can be incubated or at least not impeded.

4. **We need to find ways to bring the lessons from the five principles to scale.** For example, the Preuss School UCSD, described in Appendix B, is a public charter school on the University of California San Diego campus designed to enhance educational persistence among underrepresented students. Named by *Newsweek* as the top “transformative high school in the nation,” Preuss is widely recognized as a pioneering intervention success story. How might Preuss bring its successes at preparing low-income students for college to a larger number of students? One approach might be to assist other schools in implementing particular promising practices such as the school’s advisory period, or to assist other schools in adopting the model in a more holistic way. Both approaches may be productive, but additional research is needed to get a better sense of the affordances and constraints of each.

So, in closing, we suggest that an ideal route into these understandings and their transfer to practice is collaborative design research with the broad range of stakeholders – education practitioners, youth, families, community members, and university personnel — who together persist or facilitate persistence. These stakeholders have information regarding the context and implicit understandings that enable or constrain the implementation of research findings on promising practices.

We recommend research partnerships with stakeholders, where research is explicitly designed to improve complex educational systems. We call this **ethnographic design research**. (See Appendix B for an example from the Preuss School discussed above; see Appendices D and E for examples from different parts of the country where researchers concurrently play additional roles as mentors, program designers, etc., in multidimensional efforts to include students who are from backgrounds that have been weakly served in higher education).91 According to a recent National Society for the Study of Education report, design-based research includes:

1. a focus on problems of practice from multiple stakeholders’ perspectives;
2. a commitment to long-term collaboration;
3. a concern with developing theory and knowledge related to classroom learning and program implementation; and
4. a concern with developing the capacity for sustained system change.92

![Ethnographic design research to improve education practice.](image-url)
In concrete terms, ethnographic design research might involve creating or working with existing educational “field stations” such as the persistence-related case examples discussed in this report and featured in the appendices. In such an approach, lessons learned from research and practice on building transformative school cultures are made available to other educators, researchers, and policy makers for the purpose of positive educational change. We believe this approach holds a wealth of possibilities for ECMC’s action plan for applied research and/or pilot programs explicitly designed to analyze ongoing challenges and test specific assumptions and projected outcomes for improving educational persistence.

* * * * *

In this final report, we have sought to bring together a vast anthropological knowledge base on educational persistence in support of ECMC’s goal to initiate projects that are innovative, effective, and evidence-based. In this gathering of research and the principles for positive change it informs, we join ECMC in a concerted effort to “inspire and facilitate improvements in the systems that affect educational outcomes – especially among underserved populations.”93
Appendix A
The Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective: Brief Biosketches

**Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy** is Borderlands Professor of Indigenous Education and Justice at ASU. At ASU, he is Director of the Center for Indian Education and co-editor of the *Journal of American Indian Education*. Over the last 15 years, he and his team have created programs in Alaska, Arizona, and Utah that have prepared over 125 Indigenous teachers. His research focuses on the experiences of Indigenous students, staff, and faculty in institutions of higher education.

**Amanda Datnow** is Professor of Education Studies and Acting Associate Dean in the Division of Social Sciences at the University of California, San Diego. She received her Ph.D in Education from UCLA. Her research focuses on educational reform, particularly with regard to issues of equity. Her goals are to both improve policy and practice in education and advance theory about educational change.

**Edmund “Ted” Hamann** is an Associate Professor in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Department of Teaching, Learning, and Teacher Education. A former teacher and coordinator of a community-based bilingual family literacy program, his work over the past 20 years has examined from an anthropological perspective various facets of the educational challenges and opportunities associated with transnational movement, particularly between the U.S. and Mexico. His books include *Alumnos Transnacionales: Las Escuelas Mexicanas Frente a la Globalización* and *The Educational Welcome of Latinos in the New South*.

**Teresa L. McCarty** is the George F. Kneller Chair in Education and Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she has taught at the elementary through graduate school levels and worked with Indigenous and other underserved communities throughout the world. A fellow of the American Educational Research Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology, her work seeks to bring ethnographic research to bear on pressing problems of education policy and practice.
The Preuss School UCSD, a public charter school on the campus of the University of California, San Diego, originated as an ethnographic “design research” experiment. In the wake of the ban on affirmative action in California in the mid-1990s, the University of California expanded its outreach funding and asked campuses to work more closely with the K-12 sector to prepare more underrepresented students for UC admission. The school was created as part of a design research experiment to respond to this call. Design research involves university researchers working collaboratively with education practitioners in multiple iterations to identify problems and seek their solution. Aimed at improving practice, design research requires long-term commitment by outside researchers and school-based practitioners.94

The Preuss School UCSD’s theory of action was, as co-founder Hugh Mehan explains, to “develop a successful model for educationally underrepresented students and then to make that model available to other public schools for adaptation to their site-specific conditions.”95 The planning group who designed the school included esteemed and experienced educational leaders teachers working in collaboration with university faculty and staff. This group drew upon rigorous, primarily qualitative research to design a school that included the structural and cultural components to support the success of students from groups historically underrepresented in college. As the school’s co-founder, Cecil Lytle explained: “Preuss School UCSD set out to demonstrate that children typically found in the urban public schools of America can achieve at a very high level if the adults in their schools and in their lives set high standards and provide the [necessary] intellectual and social ‘scaffolds.’” 96

Founded in 1999, the Preuss School UCSD now serves 825 students in grades 6-12. Students must be from low-income families with parents who have not graduated from college. Key features of the Preuss model include a college-bound culture, a single-track college preparatory curriculum, an extended school day and year, academic and social support (mentoring, Saturday academies, tutoring by UCSD students), weekly faculty professional development, and parental involvement in school activities.

Named the top-ranked transformative high school by Newsweek for the past 3 years, the Preuss School UCSD has a very high success rate, with at least 95% of its graduates accepted at 4-year universities (100% in 2013).97 Ethnographic research on Preuss graduates who are in college found they have high aspirations for college and career attainment, and are confident about the academic preparation they received in high school. Drawing on the social and academic skills learned at Preuss, these graduates persevere through the college challenges they encounter.98
Appendix C
Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty

Within the context of the country’s economic downturn and its need for greater post-secondary participation, the 5-year Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty project was designed to provide scholarship and policy recommendations to help improve educational outcomes for youth in low-income communities. The study revealed five key things that matter most for understanding and improving low-income students’ success in postsecondary education:

Student voices matter. Having numbers that show how many students enrolled and persisted in postsecondary education is important, but unless we understand from students why these outcomes occur, we run the risk of misunderstanding patterns and implementing ineffective interventions. Hearing student voices is essential to understanding their pathways to and through postsecondary education.

Diversity matters. Low-income youth are a diverse group with a wide range of experiences. Paying attention to the similarities and differences in this population of students can help us better plan college success initiatives.

Assets matter. Deficit approaches blame low-income students for their lack of success, or they blame educational institutions for failing students, often without recognizing the challenging fiscal, policy, and practical constraints they operate within. The Pathways research uncovers the remarkable strengths students bring and the many positive programs that exist in educational institutions. This asset-based approach helps us understand how to design programs that better tap into and foster students’ strengths in order to support college success.

Connections between K–12 and higher education matter. Postsecondary success is not a story that begins once a student sets foot on a college campus. High-quality K–12 schooling and a host of college preparatory resources and activities must be provided in order to ensure college-going success for all students.

Institutional supports and conditions matter. To ensure that low-income students’ college aspirations are affirmed and their academic needs are met, institutional supports are essential. As students persist to and through college, they face critical transitions along the way, and certain conditions function as a “guard rail” for keeping students on the path towards college completion.

The Pathways study reinforces that low-income students are a diverse group who bring many assets to the educational enterprise. Their talents need to be fostered in order for them to realize the gains that education can bring to them, their families, and society as a whole. Supporting low-income students in postsecondary education requires an institutional commitment to their success, high-quality curricula and instruction, ongoing advising and mentoring, integration of support services and resources, and streamlined pathways to completion. While there are many examples of promising programs, the challenge is to make these conditions a reality for more students.

The Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective

Final Report to ECMC - December 2013

24
Appendix D
BESITOS

The BESITOS Program (Bilingual/Bicultural Education Students Interacting to Obtain Success) at Kansas State University (KSU) recruits culturally diverse undergraduates and high school graduates who speak various languages, were often former English language learners (ELLs), and who often enter college with low high school GPAs. These undergraduates are placed in programs of elementary and secondary teacher preparation, where they are vigorously mentored, although it is not required that they stay in teacher education to stay at KSU. If students change majors their BESITOS mentoring continues.

BESITOS increases diversity at KSU and its graduation rate exceeds that of the rest of the university. This program affirms that, with the right supports, college success is viable for first-generation college students with weak or mixed prior records of academic success, and who come from homes where English is not the first language. If broad success is possible for a group previously understood as less likely to succeed, the perpetuation of that expectation needs to be critically examined. One role of anthropology is to document “success stories” like BESITOS, and thereby contribute to the broader challenge of expanding persistence-related programs in higher education.

BESITOS is perhaps best described by its founder and current coordinator who together recently wrote:

“As quantitative studies from across the country documenting Latino students’ struggles in higher education illustrate, incoming Latino students are not completely like the students institutions like ours have traditionally served. Our recruitment efforts must begin to move from outdated public relations missions to understanding and building relationships within diverse community settings. Our retention efforts must move from perceiving students from Latino communities as part of a homogenous entity and toward auditing our systems to address the uniqueness and complexity of each student.

“Although we are proud of the BESITOS effort, this is not the task just of a special program. Rather, preparing all faculty members, advisors, counselors, and the university at large to understand the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships is essential. For example, we must recognize that working from a remediation context (e.g., drill and practice labs often staffed by tutors unprepared to work with Latina/o students) does little to encourage student persistence.”

---

The Anthropology of Educational Persistence Thought Collective  Final Report to ECMC - December 2013
Appendix E

“You Can go to College”: Understanding Masculinity and College Identity Construction for Young Men of Color

by Adrian H. Huerta, M.A., Patricia M. McDonough, Ph.D., and Walter R. Allen, Ph.D.

Nationally, only one in two low-income Black and Latino males graduate from high school. This number is comparable for certain low-income Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) such as Hmong, Laotians, Hawaiians, and Cambodians, when compared to their Japanese, Chinese, and Korean peers. The college-going rates of preparation and enrollment for young men of color lags behind their female peers and has drawn national concern for educators, policymakers, and government officials.

Factors that contribute to the derailment for young men of color (YMOC) include the constant struggle to act “tough” in order to avoid verbal or physical harassment from peers in schools or their neighborhoods. Accepting this “anti-establishment” culture often leads to school suspensions and later participation in the juvenile justice system. Other contributing factors include attending underserved schools, gang participation, and high rates of poverty. The pressure to maintain a “tough-guy” façade varies from community to community, but has caused some youth to juggle peer and social acceptance with college preparation.

The purpose of the present study was to examine how 153 Black, Latino, and AAPIs negotiate constructing their sense of masculinity simultaneously with a college-going identity. The study was based on a reanalysis of 68 qualitative focus group interviews from a larger mixed-methods research project on 502 students attending 10 Los Angeles county schools.

Focus on males: Most studies of young men of color examine the structural barriers to college access and preparation, but none have examined how urban males of color negotiate the challenges of masculinity and college-going identity construction. One Latino male student in the study shared:

“I feel like a pioneer...not a lot of men of color do go into college and seeing as I am about to go to college...I feel like I’m kind of representing my culture and race.”

The students in this study were very aware of the realities and potential outcomes if they did not pursue a better path. The male students’ definition of masculinity was the internal belief that a man’s role in his family is to be successful by providing economic stability and safe and reliable housing; this definition also included completion of a college education, obtaining a promising career and serving as a role model for his family including siblings or children. The students in the study were high school juniors and seniors, but were very aware of the future need to provide social and economic stability for their future children and families.
Caring for their families was important for the YMOC in this study, as they witnessed their own families’ personal investment in financial or emotional resources to their sons. One student shared:

“[I]t’s best for a male to go college because one day they’ll have a family and... they’ll play a major role in the family...set a foundation for their children ...going to college to get a good career, so they could support their family. It’s important.”

These young men were mindful of the long-term implications of a postsecondary credential: social mobility. Almost all the students were lower middle class (from families earning $30,000 to $39,000/year) and understood the career and financial implications of advanced education compared to a high school diploma.

**Connection to policy and practice:** We advocate that high school personnel be mindful that male students of color are still in the process of constructing an understanding of their world, opportunities, and local environment. College identity and masculinity development is different for this population because of their marginalized position in society and the education system. Ferguson’s work on Black boys in elementary school is an indicator that young men of color are in a precarious position. We have shown that the pathways are riddled with the challenges of unhealthy relationships with educators, and unclimbed barriers to postsecondary education for young men of color from low-income backgrounds. What this study offers is a new lens for understanding the experiences of Black, Latino, and AAPI high school males who are constantly negotiating both a college-going and a masculine identity. Education scholars have not explored how young men of color engage in these identity struggles to move forward and persist in the education system.

Recommendations for policy and practice include investing in more programs that help young boys develop a healthier sense of masculinity and college-going identity simultaneously. Educators, including teachers and counselors, must understand the current condition of boys of color and should be encouraged to participate in professional development to understand how to better support boys. Policymakers and community members must invest not only financial resources, but time and opportunities for boys to be mentored and taught how to navigate the educational system.
Appendix F
High School Learning Environments that Promote Persistence

An ethnographic study of undocumented Mexican-origin students revealed characteristics of high school learning environments that promote college enrollment, as well those that do not. Students who were part of specialized academies in larger public high schools felt prepared for college and enrolled. As one student explained,

“*My academy was small.... They wanted to make sure the program was for you. My teacher mentored me to make sure I was college material.*”

Another student said, “*I had help from counselors, from teachers, from the principal... [with college applications]. I am sure I would not have gone to college if they hadn’t been there for me.*”

The trusting relationships students developed with school personnel allowed them to share private details about their undocumented status or financial difficulties, enabling the adults to explore ways to support them.

The students who were part of these academies were described as positively tracked, whereas others who were not were negatively tracked into general classes with high teacher student ratios, low expectations, and scarce resources. These students did not form relationships with teachers or counselors and knew little about college. These varied experiences are consistent with other studies of students in high schools with career academies, and with Solórzano et al.’s 2013 study of low-income youth in California. In Solórzano et al.’s study, students who had “choiced” into high schools in middle/upper income areas or who enrolled in theme-specific courses or schools felt they had received an education that prepared them for college, whereas most others felt their college preparation was lacking. They felt that some teachers did not hold them to high standards and the schools did not provide rigorous curricula. This left some students with profound learning gaps, especially in writing and math, that took years to address through remedial college coursework. As one student lamented, “… it hit my self-esteem a lot.”

Other qualitative studies have also found that a lack of adequate high school preparation poses a barrier to college persistence. As a Native American student said about college classes:

“I think our education is getting a lot better on the reservation, but I really don’t feel like I was well prepared.... I’ve never seen this stuff before. I was never taught this...”
Appendix G
Financial Assistance Is Critical

Financial assistance is critical for the college persistence of low-income students. Students who face financial difficulties are far more likely to drop out or stop out of school. A qualitative study of Native American student persistence emphasized difficulty in paying for college as a key factor. This was noted by policymakers, administrators, faculty, and the students themselves. As one administrator said, “contrary to popular belief, it’s not a free ride for Indian students. Similarly, a faculty member who reflected on 25 years of working with Native American students said, “when they get into trouble, often times academically, or even in the community, you can trace their problems back to them being short of money... So if they get sufficient funding, it’s amazing how much better they can do as students.” 113 A study of undocumented Latino students found similar results regarding the financial challenges students face. The issues for these students were further compounded by their ineligibility for certain forms of aid, as well as their inability to be employed legally. 114

Even completing the required financial aid forms online can pose barriers for students. As a frustrated student in a qualitative study of low-income high school students said, “I hated it, because they didn’t even tell you what was wrong. They just say, “It’s wrong.” 115 Students in this study found the financial aid process very confusing often waited in line for hours for assistance from financial aid offices. Some students chose not to apply because they found the process so daunting, and they felt no one could assist them.

If more financial resources and other supports (e.g., child care, jobs on campus) were available to low-income students, persistence rates could be improved.
Appendix H
Seminal Anthropological Studies of Culture and Context

Shirley Brice Heath’s 1983 study, *Ways with Words*, was among the first anthropological accounts to illustrate the connections between social class, race/ethnicity, language, and students’ school-based and life opportunities. Prior to Heath’s fieldwork, research had begun to point out differences between the structures of “Black English Vernacular” (BEV) and "standard" English. Based on long-term fieldwork with African American and working- and middle-class White families in the Piedmont Carolinas, Heath argued that the disjunction between the socialization processes in which BEV is acquired and the communicative practices within the culture of the school simultaneously blind teachers to their African American students' language competencies and leave those students unprepared for the communicative practices they encounter in school.116

Heath subsequently examined socialization practices among Chinese American families and recent immigrants from Mexico. Among Chinese American parents, the question-asking routines (factual questions and control of topics) and other cultural expectations reinforced those their children encountered in schools. Among families from Mexico, adults tended not to give sequential orders or ask children to verbalize what they were doing as they worked, practices that conflicted with school-based pedagogies. The question Heath posed for educators was, how closely do the socialization practices of the home approximate those of the school?117

Susan Philips reached similar conclusions in her 1983 study of Warm Springs Indian students in Oregon, in which she used ethnography to document child-adult interaction patterns inside and outside of school. Warm Springs children, Philips maintained, are socialized in culturally distinctive ways that emphasize listening and observing over talking and speaking up, sharing control versus hierarchical structures, and voluntary versus involuntary participation in group activities. Phillips called these *participant structures*. These "invisible" cultural differences caused teachers to misunderstand their Indian pupils, or to define what they heard as unacceptable.118

Researchers from the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) took this work a step further, using ethnographic data on Native Hawaiian child socialization practices to design an English language arts program modeled after an Indigenous oral narrative style called “talk story,” which emphasizes cooperative participation structures and co-narration. These instructional changes led to dramatic improvements in Native Hawaiian students’ English language learning and academic achievement, despite the fact that the language of the classroom did not match the Hawaiian Creole English spoken at home.119

KEEP researchers subsequently implemented the same approach with Navajo students in Arizona, where they found that KEEP strategies required significant modification to accommodate Navajo discursive styles. The inference from these studies is that educa-
tional interventions based on ethnographic knowledge must be context specific, and that this contributes significantly to students’ persistence and success in school.

In Tucson, Arizona, the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching project illustrated the power of teachers’ ethnographic research to transform education practice. The project began in the late 1980s as a collaboration between university-based anthropologists and school-based practitioners to study literacy practices within Mexican American households. Conducting interviews with parents and participating in the everyday life of households, the research team elicited household knowledge essential for household functioning. In after-school study groups, teachers engaged in critical reflection on their research, applying these insights to develop curricula that incorporated the linguistic and cultural capital their students brought to school. The research process itself also established more trusting relationships between households and schools, as parental knowledge and skills became the foundation for teaching innovations.\textsuperscript{120}
References and Notes


15 Rose, M. (2012), Ibid.

16 Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid.


18 Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid.

19 Rose (2012), Ibid.


22 Jackson et al. (2003), Ibid.

23 Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid.

24 Varenne & McDermott (1998), Ibid.


27 Brayboy, B. M. J. et al. (2012), Ibid.


Chavez et al., (2012), Ibid.

Davis et al. (2004), Ibid.

Davis et al. (2004), Ibid.

Davis et al. (2004), Ibid., p. 428.

Davis et al. (2004), Ibid., p. 432.

Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid.

Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid., p. 62.

Chavez et al. (2012), Ibid., p. 788.


89 McCarty, T.L. (2013, July 16). The anthropology of educational persistence. Presentation at the ECMC Group Board of Directors Meeting, Chicago, IL.


93 ECMC Foundation (2013, April 8). *A strategic blueprint*, p. 3.


99 The Pathways to Postsecondary Success project was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

100 Solórzano et al. (2013), *ibid.*, pp. 4-8.


107 Allen et al. (2009), Ibid.

108 Ferguson (2000), Ibid.


111 Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid.

112 Guillory & Wolverton (2008), Ibid., p. 79.

113 Guillory & Wolverton (2008), Ibid., p. 70.


115 Solórzano et al. (2013), Ibid., p. 54.


119 Vogt et al. (1987), Ibid.

120 González et al. (2005), Ibid.